

Andrzej Bryk

ROMANTIC THEOPOLITICAL TESTAMENT  
- RICHARD J. NEUHAUS AND THE AMERICAN CITY OF MAN

*Christianity is to life what Shakespeare is to literature: for it envisages the whole.*  
Malcolm Muggeridge

Richard J. Neuhaus was a fascinating phenomenon. A first-rate public intellectual, in the 1960s he was a civil rights Lutheran activist for the equality of black Americans within the circle of Martin Luther King. He was a socially active priest-intellectual. Neuhaus's life was a life of an incessant burning passion, a Christian acutely aware that the times in which he lived were not ordinary times. He was at ease with the world and with people of all walks of life because he knew where the anchor was, a living embodiment of a truth found in the old maps of Christian antiquity, where Jerusalem was always at the center, the *axis mundi* – a blatant cartographical error, but a theological truth. At a time of ubiquitous disenchantment, Neuhaus was one of the greatest apologists of Christendom of today, a spectacular feast when Christendom was consigned by the majority of modern Western cognoscenti either to the ash heap of history or, at best, to a psychotherapeutic spirituality. His apology for Christendom, and the Catholic Church in that, stemmed from his understanding that Christianity, with all its sins, created and has been a defender of human freedom in the most fundamental, anthropological, but also political sense. A possible demise of Christianity would thus constitute in his judgment a menace to freedom even for those who battled it.

Neuhaus's journey from Lutheranism to Catholicism in 1990 was long, akin to the one which Henry Newman once traveled, for a long time not realizing that in fact he was always there. Because, as he observed many years later, "I was a Pro-

testant ... albeit of Catholic and Catholic proclivities".<sup>1</sup> His conversion was also a call to faith in action. Neuhaus was an embodiment of the once common link between popular religion and high intellectual achievement, a combination of religious enthusiasm and a generous and transformative change for an improvement of this world. Cold intellectual sterility was not his style. He was living proof of someone who knew, as did the protagonists of Marilyn Robinson's novel, that "nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense".<sup>2</sup> This was a treasure in an age when the cognoscenti decided that reasoned faith is a charming oxymoron. Having no patience with the secular intellectuals criticizing transcendental religions, who exhibited an ocean of ignorance and bad will, he reserved his most biting comments for the most radical of them, the new atheists, a curious brand of toxic pseudo-intellectuals who were late for the Enlightenment. Neuhaus dismissed them with the tart remark that he did not believe in the God in which they did not believe.

### Post-1968 monistic liberalism and *The Naked Public Square*

In the 1980s, when he wrote his most famous book, *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus was considered a conservative. But his refusal to abandon traditional liberalism, coupled with his conversion to Catholicism, gained him the label of a "neo-conservative", a notoriously elusive term, more one of abuse in recent decades than explaining anything.<sup>3</sup> In terms of Catholic teaching, he was definitely a defender of the orthodoxy subverting the development within the Church dominant since the '60s, which exploded in that decade and went by the name of liberal Catholic theology, and which seemed gradually to have run its course.

For Neuhaus such liberal Catholicism was a dangerous path for the church's theology. He realized that if the Church yielded theologically and morally, it would progressively become a province of a liberal state, since "where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed."<sup>4</sup> The problem was deeper though. Such liberal Catholicism, or Protestantism or Judaism, apart from professing just social gospel with such issues as the fight against poverty, war, or the environment, would soon turn the doctrinal, metaphysical component into some kind of spiritual comfort, psychology of a communion with the healing, all embracing God, so as to strengthen, not guide the inner self-esteem, merging with psychology turned to religion. Neuhaus knew that psychology was valuable only when it was based on sound metaphysics, but when it relied on a false philosophy, it became not only nonsense, but at the same time disastrous.

---

<sup>1</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square Now: A Symposium* on the 20-year anniversary of the publication of his influential *The Naked Public Square*, "First Things" 2004, November, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in C. Miller, *Simple Gifts*, "Claremont Review of Books" 2009, Fall, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> He was termed a religious "neoconservative", later dubbed during George W. Bush's years a "theocon", and was portrayed as such in the media, including such diverse networks as PBS, C-SPAN, and EWTN.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in: R. R. Reno, *Religion, Culture, and Life*, "First Things" 2009, April, p. 57.

Apart from a youthful stint with radicalism, throughout his life Neuhaus remained a liberal democrat in politics, in the traditional sense of the word, when liberalism had not yet turned in the wake of the '60s into a monistic "religion", excluding people not sharing its new anthropology and morality from public life. He had an Aristotelian and Augustinian view of politics. From Aristotle he took the conviction that people, irrespective of where they came from, should discuss and organize their life together for the common good. Against those who removed themselves from the civilizational circle of moral conversation he minced no words, branding the enlightened or less enlightened barbarians refusing a priori to be limited by what we know, wisdom we have received, and traditional notions of good and evil, right and wrong. For those who wanted to be part of a civilized circle of moral conversation, the essence of liberal democracy for him, he was always open to argument, provided they shared with him an understanding that truth existed and what was worthy in life did not stem from the whimsical wishes of the imperial Self. But he was also Augustinian, realizing that the first thing to remember was that politics was not the most important thing, and a fundamental division in politics between *sacrum* and *profanum* was a precondition of human freedom.

A radical critic sometimes of the most repugnant features of the new liberal civilization, Neuhaus showed no bitterness towards life and people of even the most opposite views. He knew that modernity was a station in human history into which God placed Himself. He realized the verity of the truth expressed by a protagonist from Robert Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities*, that one could not be angry with one's own times without doing damage to oneself. But as a public – and Catholic – intellectual, he was aware, after Augustine, of the provisionality of every mundane order, considering it his duty to "subject every mundane political or cultural order to the final judgment of the Kingdom of God".<sup>5</sup> His passion, and the memory of the glorious days of his social activity, prompted him sometimes to take risky intellectual endeavors and reckless political choices. This pertained especially to his flirting with liberal democracy as the best regime. In this respect he was a romantic Actonian. Part of that liberalism was of course the crucial presence of a transcendental religion, mainly Christianity, in the public square, in other words an absence of the "naked public square", a profoundly illiberal situation, which was eventually, he thought, to elevate a state into the position of absolute, uncontested sovereign. The "liberation" of the '60s and radical secular modernity began to threaten the moral order and free exercise of religion. The decision of the Supreme Court in 1947 in "*Everson v. Board of Education*" (330 U.S. 1), stating in effect that the First Amendment was to create a neutral public sphere, something which Neuhaus later called the "naked public square", as a consequence led to a secular "sacralization" of the idea of the separation of religion from society and culture.<sup>6</sup> From now

---

<sup>5</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *Katolicy nie potrafią udowodnić swych racji* [Catholics cannot prove they are right], "Europa", 14, June 2006, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, *The Public Square*, "First Things" 2006, November, p. 78.

on there was only a short step to conclude that the aim of the First Amendment was to protect the public space from religion in the name of neutrality and the rights of non-religious people. The whole post-Emerson adjudication thus revolved around the idea that religious people constituted a threat to the public order. On the basis of this adjudication the American elites began to create a climate which slowly pushed religious people into the margins of public life. The public rousing of religiously minded people in America since the 1970s, essentially a move of self-defense, was done in the name of freedom and in the name of the community.

Neuhaus responded to the new situation in 1984 with the book *The Naked Public Square*, understanding that the religious communities were fighting precisely for the separation of state and church, in a situation when the state began to dictate to religious communities their right social and doctrinal place. It was, argued Neuhaus, precisely the lack of such a separation which threatened religious communities, and subjected them to public discrimination in the traditionally Christian America. This was no coincidence. The Supreme Court began slowly to accept a new anthropology of the imperial Self as a sole arbiter of individual right against rights of the community. Culture was taken over by the legislation of social justice propelled by rights derived from a subjective sense of grievance. The line between inalienable human rights and social rights was blurring, and the imperial Self was to be the sole arbiter of rights. Such a doctrine could not be an effective policy, but it was an effective ram to push religious language and people from public discussion, to prepare quite a coherent doctrine of a new community defined by the new secular elites.

With *The Naked Public Square* Neuhaus countered the official stance of the Supreme Court and the secular elites, pointing out that a point of separation in the antiestablishment clause of the First Amendment was not an enlightened rationalism, but the reality of various competing religious groups. It was thus prudent to neutralize the state in matters of religion rather than run the risk of one of their opponents gaining control of the government. Thus “we must never tire of explaining [that] the ‘no establishment’ provision of the First Amendment is entirely in the service of the ‘free exercise of religion’”.<sup>7</sup> The point of the “antiestablishment” portion of the First Amendment was therefore not to defend a state and society against religion, but exactly the opposite, to defend religion against a state so as to provide security of religious denominations to function fully in a public sphere. Today, the situation is the same, except the realignment of alliances, since “the lines of suspicion and hostility are less and less between competing religious groups and more and more between publicly assertive religion in response to publicly assertive secularism”.<sup>8</sup>

*The Naked Public Square* was not only the book which brought Neuhaus into public prominence, but it enabled him to organize a milieu of similar-thinking

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

people, beginning many public initiatives over the years, of which three seem to be the most consequential. The first was the founding of the Institute of Religion and Public Life in 1989. It began to publish the *First Things* magazine in 1990. The second, following Neuhaus's conversion to Catholicism in 1990, was the manifesto "The Evangelicals and Catholics Together", an ecumenical project that Neuhaus initiated with Charles Colson in 1992, to overcome the strains and tensions within American Christianity and to formulate a common strategy in the face of rampant and aggressive secularism. This turned out to be a crucial, even if rocky, alliance between the Evangelicals and the Catholics, or, to put it more precisely, between the conservative Evangelicals and the conservative Catholics, although the latter would probably prefer to be called orthodox.

The third initiative was a very controversial symposium at First Things in 1996 entitled "The End of Democracy?", in which the participants put forth the question whether an activist, rights-constructing role of the Supreme Court was still within the limits of a democratic, constitutional mandate, or whether it was already an usurpation of power.<sup>9</sup> All three initiatives constituted a practical application of the ideas which Neuhaus promulgated in *The Naked Public Square*. But if the first two could be considered to be somehow intra-religious affairs, the third was considered by many as radical, calling for civil disobedience tactics and denying, *inter alia*, the legitimacy of the American political system.

With the first two initiatives the presence of religious, public-minded communities slowly began to be accepted. The religious communities took their place in the public square, after a very long absence, as a civilizing cultural and social force in America. This acceptance was yet marred by accusations of this movement and its leaders of theocracy. Neuhaus and some others were soon dubbed "theoconservatives".<sup>10</sup> This constituted an ominous case of criminalization by association, when the very word "theocon" elicited images of a theocratic government like Iran. Neuhaus vehemently protested against such a term, while trying to elucidate a position regarding the liberalism he believed in.

Neuhaus believed that liberal democracy as he conceived it could at this point in history be the best available regime. He accepted liberal democracy not because it constituted the end of the human adventure in history, but conditionally, as for now, the best regime in which the properly formed moral aims of a human being can be achieved. For him sectarianism was for practical as well as theological reasons a false road for Christians. The Church was not a sect and could not escape the world, but only work out the best way in the existing one, using *non possumus* tactics, and the catacombs option, only in the conditions of grave idolatry which

---

<sup>9</sup> The editors of *First Things* formulated the problem as follows: "If the judiciary continues on its present course, if it does not restrain itself, and if there is no way to restrain it we are witnessing the end of democracy. See a transcript of that symposium, with a discussion which followed." *The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus, M. Muncy, Dallas 1997.

<sup>10</sup> The term was probably used for the first time by Jacob Heilbrunn in *Neocon vs. Thecon*, "New Republic", December 30, 1996, p. 20–24.

may corrupt a community. There was of course such a case which warranted for Neuhaus such a choice. This was abortion, which excluded the unborn from the common world of moral obligation, which is why Neuhaus battled it without hesitation.

As he never tired of insisting in an Augustinian fashion, a Christian was in this world, but not entirely of this world.<sup>11</sup> Yet there is a certain ambiguity in Neuhaus's reasoning about liberal democracy. St. Augustine lived in the Roman Empire, but he had no illusions about its corruption, even if many elements of it, for instance Roman law, were a universal possession of humanity. The Christian conscience, that is the true human conscience, was what counted for Augustine, and Rome was corrupting it. For Neuhaus that connection was much more nuanced, and he thought that there was a "pure" uncorrupted core of liberalism which could be either restored or searched for. That was not necessarily a bad pragmatic stance, but intellectually, and ultimately morally, it was risky. It is probable that there could never be the possibility of such a civil public square as Neuhaus longed for within the province of liberal ideology as a monistic ideology of the liberal Self. If so, then to be faithful to the City of God and St. Augustine's distinction it was necessary to discern the very structural impossibilities of such an argument within liberal democracy as it has developed, and to create a new one, so as to engage oneself in a fundamentally countercultural, anti-systemic activity.<sup>12</sup> To be honest, at the end of his life Neuhaus seemed to be more aware of such a dismal possibility. This was not only because the basics of his core religious beliefs were more and more incompatible with the tenets of existing liberal democracy, as they began to be codified now into a secular ideology of "human rights", with protests against such dogmas utterly ineffectual. Intimations of this subtle reconsideration process may be visible in an elegiac form in his public testament, *American Babylon*.

Catholics have of course always had a problem with the United States, and Neuhaus is not an exception here. The problem was not the transient one of political and social discrimination, which to all practical purposes disappeared in the 1950s. It was also not a problem of so-called "dual loyalty". The problem was theologically deeper. From the point of view of the Catholic orthodoxy there has always been something suspicious about a nation which stated in its foundational document, The Declaration of Independence, as one of its basic values the "pursuit of happiness", that is paradise on Earth, which was to be added, even if not predicted in the New Testament, into the promised paradise in Heaven. Of course

<sup>11</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon*, New York 2009, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> This was a core of a feud with the paleoconservatives, who told Neuhaus that he was not recognizing that the constitutional liberal regime in the United States he was dreaming about had gone at least half a century ago, a fact that they claimed Neuhaus had not noticed. See *The End of Democracy?...*, p. 225–227. This of course implied that there was a possibility of sustaining a classical liberal constitutional "perpetuum mobile" of the American regime, a fascinating dream of the American conservatives, and a perennial baffling surprise not only of the cynical at large European intellectuals of all camps, let alone Catholics. This was also a feud with some Jewish neoconservative critics of the "First Things" symposium in 1997, who apparently seemed to tolerate Neuhaus's Catholic truths if they were relativized, or pushed aside from the public square. *Ibidem*, p. 218.



one could argue that this pursuit of happiness was part of such natural rights tied to the moral law prescribed by Creator. But the “pursuit of happiness” began to be understood, as one of the protagonists of *The Great Gatsby* remarked, as a license to treat America as a “great magic”, where everything was possible. From the point of view of Catholic doctrine this was a double heresy, theological and political. This heresy contributed to a decline in liberal Christianity in America, in both its Protestant and Catholic dimensions, in terms of metaphysical soundness.

There was also a strong expectation from non-Catholics that Catholicism would evolve gradually into a kind of religious individualism. A similar process befell Protestantism. Catholics were expected to filter the truths of faith through a prism of individual conscience.

The problem was not that an active search for faith among Catholics or spreading their faith was excluded from the public square; that was not feasible under the First Amendment doctrine of freedom of religion. What was expected on the side of the political and religious Protestant establishment was that the Catholic truth would be subordinated to the overreaching aim of American religiosity, that is a judgment of each individual conscience with slight attention given to theological orthodoxy. This individual conscience directed by the all-American individual “pursuit of happiness” would cause a situation whereby each faith would be allotted a niche for followers to nurture their faith, and in a similar way ethnic groups could nurture their individual identities. There was in such an approach a danger of trivialization, of turning religion into one of the Roman cults once supporting the glory of the empire, and now supporting the glory of America as a universal nation. Christianity and Catholicism, as any other religion, was to be turned into a kind of a social Gospel, a nice sublimation of a metaphysical longing into useful social causes, with charity and ubiquitous, all-tolerant vocabulary of forgiving love towards others, the world, and finally oneself, with a sprinkle of the “feel good” popular psychotherapy. The end station of such a development was a gradual decay of liberal Protestantism and also a decay of liberal Catholicism.<sup>13</sup> The questions concerning the very essence of the reality of human existence began to morph into a kind of pantheistic spirituality aimed at “feeling good”. Catholicism, as happened earlier with liberal Protestantism, felt increasingly incapable of providing any clear criteria of moral judgment.

Protestantism could not sustain such pressure, and eventually split into liberal and fundamentalist wings. As for Catholicism, “opening windows” and “building bridges” to the world in the wake of the Second Vatican Council caused such a liberal Church to be headed by an increasingly liberal hierarchy, which split Catholicism and resulted overall in a civil war. That pertained to other Churches too, splitting them in the ‘70s into two warring camps, liberal and conservative.

---

<sup>13</sup> An excellent analysis of this process was made in two articles by J. Bottum: *When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano: Catholic Culture in America*, “First Things”, October 2006 and *The Death of Protestant America: A Political Theory of the Protestant Mainline*, “First Things”, August–September 2008.

This time the split was not between the traditional denominations of Catholics and Protestants, but within them, forming more or less visible alliances across denominations. Whatever the causes, consequences, and adequacy of responses, the fundamental issue went well beyond a matter of political, social, or even conventional doctrinal issues. The Churches had to confront a fundamental problem of the post-1968 liberal order, the problem of the ontological status of truth and its source, which liberal civilization for the first time began to question, with Christianity gradually being defined as irrelevant. An anthropology of the imperial Self was put in its place. What was at stake was the question how the Christian Churches, as well as any creedal faith, for instance Orthodox Judaism, should respond, and how they were going to function within such a liberal civilization tolerating them as “just” one of the versatile identity groups within the general framework of human rights.<sup>14</sup>

Such changes led to a dramatic questioning of traditional sources of human freedom and dignity, which the post-1968 monistic liberalism began to define anew. Its radical ontological and anthropological axiom began to be treated as a yardstick for legitimate behavior, in fact citizenship as such. It appeared that post-1968 liberalism had decided to wage an open war on the totality of human institutions, traditions, mores and wisdom itself, with its battle cry, taken from the New Left, of “emancipation” of everything from any conceivable “oppression”, which in fact meant the totality of the existing culture and religious life.<sup>15</sup> Culture was defined as one seamless garb of post-modernist personal narratives, bound together by the ubiquitous prattle of “inclusion” of everything “excluded” in the world, without any judgment, hierarchy or condemnation for fear of “discrimination”, with solipsistic disintegration of common language and community life and a redefinition of human rights. Such a world view began to take over the Christian meaning of sin, substituting for it psycho-therapeutic dialogue and self-contentment.

The biblical narrative suddenly began to be one of the possible narratives, or identities, to be chosen at will among all other available ones, including simply a personal narrative of any subjective will. Such a biblical narrative might be useful for teaching the good morality thus aiding the liberal narrative of emancipation and inclusion. That constituted the end of Christendom, since the Bible in Christian civi-

---

<sup>14</sup> D. B. Hart defined this issue dramatically for the Christian churches as simply a rejection of the very essence of Christianity, a position considered by monistic liberalism as being a precondition of legitimate functioning in a liberal state. The issue, as he put it, was straightforward “If we turn from Christ [the truth – AB] today, we turn only towards the god of absolute will, and embrace him under either his most monstrous or his most vapid aspect.” D. B. Hart, *Christ or Nothing*, “First Things”, October 2003, p. 47–57.

<sup>15</sup> See: H. Hecló, *Christianity and American Democracy*, Cambridge 2007; for an explanation for why the conflict immediately touched the essence of human freedom see D. B. Hart, *Freedom and Decency*, “First Things”, June–July 2004, esp. p. 41–41. Alisdair MacIntyre claimed in that context that however one frames it, “liberalism is [always] preempting the debate...so that [objections to it] appear to have become debates within liberalism ... so called conservatism and so-called radicalism in contemporary debates are in general merely staking horses for liberalism: the contemporary debates within modern political systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals and radical liberals. There is little place in such political systems for the criticism of the system itself, that is, for putting liberalism in question”. A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, as quoted [in:] E. T. Oakes, *The Achievement of Alisdair MacIntyre*, “First Things”, August–September 1996.



lization, which created the modern society by providing its humanistic justification, was not just one of the narratives which constituted a part of some greater, cosmic narrative, to which other narratives belonged. It was the exclusive Great Narrative, which contained within itself all other narratives and made all others redundant.<sup>16</sup> The Church in that perspective was a depositary of *anamnesis*, a guardian of memory, the essence of which was the Truth which elevated each human being to the image of God and made it untouchable by any other threatening human narrative, inexorably driven by a rationalized, utilitarian desire. The Church was not an organization with charitable, cultural or sociological theology, treated as exercises in perfection of one's ego.

Neuhaus was cursed and blessed to be part of such a drama. His response was as conscious as it was countercultural, doctrinally and politically. He understood, while still a Lutheran minister, that such a cultural and anthropological redefinition of reality posed a colossal challenge to traditional Christian orthodoxy. By implication it weakened the conflict with any other Christian Church, or currents within them, for whom the biblical narrative was an existential point of reference, while at the same time exacerbating such a conflict with these Churches, or the currents within them, which were more or less consciously accepting anti-biblical narrative. The same conflict, to be sure, was visible within liberalism, which began to split into all kinds of branches, with the so-called American liberal conservatives strongly clinging to the natural rights sources of American or human identity.

From a cultural and social point of view this was a new situation and made possible an opening on the part of all biblically faithful orthodox Churches to allay themselves, orthodox Catholics, fundamentalist Protestants, Orthodox Jews. Such an alliance was difficult to form. Protestant fundamentalism rebelled against liberal Protestantism, but escaped into its own world of faith, which from the point of view of the Catholic Church was emotional, not reasoned faith. Many fundamentalist churches reacted to the de facto creeping atheism of the Protestant Mainline Churches by escaping towards "unreasonable faith". Many Catholics distancing themselves from liberal Catholicism in the wake of the Second Vatican Council joined fundamentalists stressing born-again, evangelical aspects. But instead of "faith seeking understanding", these Catholics subconsciously found themselves as allies of "faith escaping from understanding". Such Catholics began to be looked upon as pawns in a war against "understanding destroying faith" preached by the Protestant left, that is liberal Protestantism. Catholicism began to split, as far as both the faithful and the priesthood were concerned.

Neuhaus, still as a Lutheran minister, was aware of different ways of expressing faith vis-à-vis the new liberal challenge, seeing the dialectical dimensions of the "unreasonable, escaping from understanding faith" of Protestant evangelicals with born-again, evangelical Catholics, "faith seeking understanding" of orthodox Catholics and Protestants. All of them reacted against the "understanding destroy-

---

<sup>16</sup> D. B. Hart, *Christ or Nothing...*

ing faith” which united the liberal wings of the Protestant and Catholic Churches, accepting the Social Gospel narrative within the larger language of progressive, monistic liberal narrative, and the latter’s stance towards religion, treated as a generic phenomenon, irrespective of what it was.<sup>17</sup> The churches, which began to stress less a proper understanding of the Gospel, discipline and traditional liturgy, including the Catholic Church, the most disciplined in its orthodoxy, began to crack. But the Catholic Church had such a problem on this scale for the first time, since what was at stake was not in fact a fight over the meaning of the Gospel, but one over the very relevance of the Church itself.<sup>18</sup> A colossal schism comparable to the Reformation was looming large. It was during such turbulent times that Pope John Paul II took over the Church in 1978, and it was then that Neuhaus began to move towards orthodox Catholicism. Both eventually began to act in different realms, but they were very close theologically.

Neuhaus by temperament was a social activist and intellectual fighter, obsessed by questions over what the relationship between Christianity and the world, between the Church, and finally individual Christians and the world should be. He knew that Christianity was at a dramatic crossroads, and tried to answer his questions in response to the above developments, which amounted not only to a revolution inside Christianity, but to equally important evolutions inside of liberal, dominant Western doctrine. The first was threatening the integrity of the Christian creed; the second was threatening human freedom, and religious freedom at that. *The Naked Public Square* was a response to that dramatic predicament. Christianity, he said had a duty to engage culture energetically, and by that very fact to engage inescapably with politics as such. This was a more pressing task than ever, because Neuhaus already knew that the monistic pretensions of the post-1968 liberal politics, premised more and more on the idea that “the private is political” and thus needs to be “liberated” for the sake of individual rights, devour and dominate, in a totalitarian manner, more and more autonomous social bodies. This meant especially the bodies which were traditionally outside of politics and no concern for politics, the very core of the Christian understanding of freedom based on the Augustinian distinction between *sacrum* and *profanum*. This constituted an emasculation of civil society and a subordination of the people to the logic of state power operated by the elites professing such an ideology, the problem Neuhaus and Peter Berger dealt with in the influential pamphlet “To Empower People”.<sup>19</sup> This engagement of culture was not

<sup>17</sup> See for instance: R. J. Neuhaus’s essay published in: *Civil Religion and Political Theology*, ed. L. S. Rouser, Indiana 1986, p. 87–90, 209–211.

<sup>18</sup> Within the Church there was also another current, less threatening at face value, because it officially did not subvert doctrine, simply transcending it. This was a drift towards “spirituality”, coming from East Asian religions, represented by such a prominent figure of Neuhaus’s generation, as the Trappist Thomas Merton, or the Jesuit Anthony de Mello S.J. See a comment on this in “First Things” 2006, Vol. 2, p. 53, 64–65.

<sup>19</sup> P. L. Berger, R. J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: the Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*, Washington D.C., 1976. The concept of “private is political” is treated here figuratively. The slogan was invented by the radical feminist movement within the New Left “emancipation” ideology and inescapably dovetailed with the traditional liberal concern for individual rights. But once rights began to be grounded in an anthropology which

easy, but it had to be done. After John Courtney Murray, Neuhaus revived the tradition of “public theology”. He delineated his more theologically precise program in his important book *The Catholic Moment*, on his way to Catholicism and shortly before his conversion”.<sup>20</sup>

Neuhaus championed a form of Catholic wisdom that the modern world could not tolerate except in a condescending way, either by ostracism or with a shrug. But he had no doubt, following Murray, that Roman Catholicism was

[...] the keeper of a truth that has everything to do with the right ordering of our lives together in the “City of Man”. Murray represents a tradition of “public theology” that takes the world up on its claim to be, above all else, reasonable. In this view the mission of Roman Catholicism is not to be a refuge from the world nor a crusade against the world, but a wisdom for the world. Murray did not want to diminish the distinctiveness, even the scandalon, of the Church .... With Walker Percy [we may] come to the perfectly sensible conclusion that the modern world is manifestly mad. By the measures of such a world a sane person might very well seem to be mad. [But] it makes all the difference....whether one is a fool for Christ or just plain fool ... Faith is for flaunting and the world must be challenged, but faith is not to be confused with a religious self-indulgence that ends up challenging not at all a world that has long since learned to tolerate almost anything ..... There was, and there is, another Roman Catholicism that is determined to engage the world on its own terms. It is not enough ... to flaunt and defy ... [But this] scandalon of the Church [constitutes] the distinctiveness of the Church that, by contrast, highlights the distinctiveness of the civil society that we call the modern world ... When the Church engages in the modern world, it must employ also the language of the head ... the tradition of Thomas Aquinas [which] has ... far from existed its possibilities in building an ecumenical understanding of the Church in the world. This is one of “the riddles of Roman Catholicism”, how it contains the tradition of both romance and reason in its relation to the world.<sup>21</sup>

This engagement in culture may be based on several paradigmatic models. If we assume for the sake of argument H. Richard Niebuhr’s potential models for Christian engagement in culture on which Neuhaus relied, we have five such models: the Church against the world, the Church of the world, the Church above the world, the Church as the transformer of the world and the Church and the world in paradox.<sup>22</sup> Neuhaus’s clearly stated choice was the fifth model. Only paradox seemed to be capacious enough and capable of holding the first four tensions all at once. That is why

---

made the imperial Self their source, with an auto-created individual morality, definition of oneself and the world, the concept of rights, and inescapably the concept of human rights at that, began to be defined in relation to it. This anthropology became a basic doctrine, for instance, of the US Supreme Court decision in “Planned Parenthood v. Casey” of 1992. As a consequence the list of rights began to be extended step by step, and because of autonomous institutions, like for instance families and churches, are treated as problematic institutions enslaving a “non-emancipated” autonomous individual. This gave modern liberalism the ominous twist of having a totalitarian potential, a monistic ideology waging war on any as yet not liberated institution. See on that process: A. McIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame IN 1981; also P. Manent, *A World beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation State*, Princeton 2007.

<sup>20</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: “The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World*, San Francisco 1987.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16–24.

[...] the Church is at points against the world, but always for the world by its participation in the transcendent, and it is ahead of the world by its anticipation of a future time, yet it is always of the world. And it is transformer of the world, not merely by providing spiritual energy for existing goals of change, but, most importantly, by reminding the world of its incompleteness, by preventing prideful or despairing acts of premature closure, by keeping the world open to the promised transformation that is the destiny of Church and world alike. Authentic paradox is not like a riddle ... that can be solved by greater understanding or the application of more careful reasoning. Authentic paradox, the paradox of the Church in the world, cannot be solved; it can only be superseded. It will be superseded, we have reason to believe, by the fulfillment of the promise, by the coming of the Kingdom.<sup>23</sup>

The Church thus has to resist both the temptation of the Great Inquisitor to close history by political means in the name of the Gospel, and that of the Great Escape from this world, that desire of “saving negativity toward the word”, as Neuhaus formulated it.<sup>24</sup> The Church’s proposition here was to be premised upon a promise, and it was to be in tension with all such views of reality, as Neuhaus points out, premised simply upon the present world alone. The Church must also live in the present, but it is its promise which defines the ultimate truth about the present. The Church’s relationship to the world is

[...] essentially paradoxical. It is a relationship of yes and no, now and not yet. The Church will endure until the End Time, but along the way it is ever being tested as to whether it has the courage to live in paradoxical fidelity. Nowhere is that testing so severe, nowhere is the outcome of that testing so ominous, as in the Roman Catholic Church. ... the paradox cannot be resolved and must not be relaxed. It can only be superseded by the coming of the One who is both the consummation and companion of our common pilgrimage.<sup>25</sup>

To fulfill that role the Church also has to define its moment properly, since it was a holy institution of the unholy people. To meet this double task, two intertwined missions – to the world and to America – had to be taken up. But they could only be accomplished, Neuhaus argued, by the Roman Catholic Church resisting the Protestant liberalization of faith, and also liberalization theology, which in many Christian circles coincided. The Church cannot “Protestantize”, since it would turn into one among myriad modern, social gospel Churches, turning to politics as a way of creating the kingdom on this earth. But this would amount to the greatest heresy of all, the immanentization of the *eschaton*. Neuhaus’s intellectual project was aimed at forming a conscious new coalition of Churches. Such a coalition could then engage culture with a proper understanding of its role in relation to the Christian promise of making the best of human beings, of calling them to heroism.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18. It was the latter’s course of Christian witnessing, as represented by a theologian Stanley Hauerwas, which became the basis of a friendly, if uncompromising argument between them, until the heated climax during the American engagement in Iraq in 2003 on the basis of the just war doctrine, which received conditional, and soon criticized, support from Neuhaus.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 288.

Neuhaus was one of the theologians and ministers who saw in John Paul II someone for whom they had been waiting for a long time, a pontiff absolutely at ease in this world and outside of it, ecumenical to the core, but at the same uncompromising on the most fundamental principles of the faith, who was engaging this world in an active way, always knowing where the center of the cosmos was, and who brought from his Polish heritage its most cherished and heroic value of freedom. But both the pope and Neuhaus represented probably the last optimistic Christians in the phase of Catholic engagement in the world, at least in the Western world, when it was still thought that it was possible to engage and move Western culture.

There was in the “Catholic Moment” a certain choice of a political project, if not overtly done, at least by implication. Neuhaus, like Murray before him, sided with the idea that at this point of time in human history Christianity could give qualified support to help sustain the liberal project. Or one should better say its American version, rooted in the Enlightenment, which was definitely British and American, not the Jacobin French one. Such a liberal American Enlightenment, explicitly promulgated in the universal, natural law language of the Declaration of Independence of 1776, contained within itself an assumption that its operating political idea of freedom could not be sustained without the spiritual resources of Christianity. Neuhaus was an heir here to all those American thinkers, politicians and preachers like Orestes Brownson, Abraham Lincoln, Richard Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray, or Martin Luther King. All of them claimed that it is impossible to understand and sustain the story of American freedom without the Christian story.<sup>26</sup>

### **“American Babylon” and the hopes of civilized liberal democracy**

With such a faith came Neuhaus’s conviction that liberal regimes on a course to aggressive secularism could somehow make a turnaround, that they could turn to Christianity, in the case of America an American foundational religion without which the cause of freedom could not be sustained. Behind such an argument was a much more far-fetched project to avoid a clash of civilizations and make the Western type of liberal freedom possible to contemplate for the non-Western, for instance Islamic world. As Neuhaus argued on many an occasion, there was no chance that these people could accept a Western type of liberal regime, if the operating principle of that regime was decisively anti-religious, and which made this anti-religiosity a *sine qua non condition* of building such a regime. That was, Neuhaus warned, a recipe for disaster on a global scale, since in such a case secularism, an aggressive ideology which refuses to give religion its rightful place in the public square and public deliberation, would turn out to be not a historical affliction of the Western liberal way, but its constitutive element. But it did not have to be so,

---

<sup>26</sup> See: A. Bryk, *Covenant, the Fear of Failure and Revivals as the Contemporary Sources of American Identity* [to be published].

and it was not so, argued Neuhaus, observing and seeking with great magnanimity the possibility of democratization of Islamic countries from despotism. There was in that hope a wonderful disposition towards the Christian idea of freedom being tantamount to the liberal idea of freedom, the modern equivalent of Christian universality straight from St. Paul's letters.<sup>27</sup>

As far as his optimism was concerned life proved him wrong on many counts. By the end of his life he had realized that it was increasingly belied by the course events had taken in the Western world, let alone America. Europe had long ago turned out to base its project of the European Union on the premise that Christianity, its foundational religion, was not necessary to aid its freedom. It was also not fit to provide culturally the only European common identity. In fact the European Union was building its identity on a contemporary version of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French liberalism, with Christianity as the greatest enemy of freedom, in fact responsible for all the previous calamities in history.<sup>28</sup>

His greatest disappointment was yet to come with America, even if it was not overtly articulated. Neuhaus experienced an acute sense of puzzlement, when he observed the confusion of languages into which American religiosity was sliding, in the face of the more and more aggressive secular liberalism. His beloved Catholic Church had to endure the agony of the sex abuse scandals, instead of assertively taking the lead from the declining mainline Protestantism, let alone "civilizing" and infusing with theologically reasoned argument the public debate, including the public debate into which the fundamentalist and evangelical wings of Protestantism thrust themselves.

General cultural trends have turned out to be more ominous, a situation long recognized in Europe and applauded there, but in America not only new, but looked upon with deep concern. True, the liberal wings of Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic, have run their course and are drying out on the theological and cultural roads erroneously taken. It is also true that the new orthodox, conservative movements have increasingly set the tone of religious as well as American public language since the 1970s and '80s. Nevertheless, Neuhaus's optimism has not been corroborated by the hard realities of the American religiosity. Not only had the growth of liberal Christianity by the beginning of the 21st century reached its limits of expansion, but the American public has turned out to be less abiding religiously, which Neuhaus took for granted. And the picture of that religiosity is more and more blurred and confused.

---

<sup>27</sup> His Christian liberalism was ultimately very much a balancing act, which, some say, later in life led him to reckless political choices. Whatever the merits or demerits of such accusations, not all of them were coming from the circles of his avowed enemies. There is no doubt that his Christian liberalism was always "in danger of tipping over into an idolatrous Christianity that confuses America with the Church and vice versa, or into an idolatrous liberalism that acknowledges no authority higher than Hobbes Leviathan or the imperial self", in clear contradiction to his theoretical scheme of engagement on the part of the Christian explained in his books. R. Douhat, *By the Waters...*, "National Review", April 20, 2009, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> See: A. Bryk, *The United States, the European Union, Eastern Europe: Different Approaches and Responses to Modernity*, "Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe" 2008, Vol. 1.



This picture is not only complicated by the offensive of the militant secular atheists, a kind of *déjà vu*, a pseudo-intellectual phenomenon reminiscent of the European Enlightenment fight against religion two centuries ago. This is a marginal phenomenon, even if a noisy one. These atheists are philosophically anachronistic and primitive. Theologically they express the depth of wisdom of a village atheist. In fact, they celebrate unreason over reason, ignorance over knowledge, hatred over understanding.<sup>29</sup> Although they may be hailed and marketed by the new secular, aggressive liberal cognoscenti of the media or the universities, their efficacy is limited, as is the efficacy of any fad of a moment used for sinister purposes of persuasive, self-serving manipulation. But the fact that they proliferate signifies the easy gullibility of the public, no longer sure what is their religiosity, with more and more Americans, along with the rest of the Western world, sliding slowly into a kind of pantheistic spirituality, the ominous prospect which Tocqueville observed as a possible spiritual dead-end station of the democratic man.<sup>30</sup> In the course of this process a kind of ersatz Christianity, a long term consequence of the liberal post-‘60s dissolution of Christian orthodoxy coupled with a spread of a therapeutic culture, has begun to proliferate, creating a phenomenon named “moralistic therapeutic deism”.<sup>31</sup> Neuhaus was at the end of his life aware of this process. He attempted to explain the American religious dynamic and American liberal-democratic predicament in his last book, with the grim title *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile*. It may seem to be a collection of hastily assembled essays, but it is one which is nevertheless bound by a profound underlying narrative. In *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus decried the exclusion of religion, chiefly Christianity, from public discussion and policy making. His argument was made less from a stance of a sectarian believer as from the point of view of a freedom-oriented man in a liberal democracy. He was convinced that once religion was driven from the public square a state would establish a virtual monopoly on public space and its basic meanings. By doing that, it would establish a pseudo-religion of its own, in fact imposing absolute sovereignty, with a corresponding diminution of human potential stemming from rightly ordered freedom. *American Babylon* takes up these thoughts, but it is additionally a book about America, Neuhaus’s trust in her people and their energy. This is finally a book about passionate, romantic adventure, and at the same time his testament, a profound meditation on a closing life.

---

<sup>29</sup> See on this the study of one of the most profound modern religious thinkers D. B. Hart, *Atheists Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press 2009.

<sup>30</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chicago 2000, p. 425–426.

<sup>31</sup> The idea of a therapeutic culture was essentially predicated on the notion that it would be a substitute for Christianity. See A. R. Heintze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton 2004, something which Neuhaus pointed out in his review of Heintze’s book in one of his *Public Square* reviews. On the psychotherapeutic culture see the classic study by P. Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, Wilmington 2006; the term “moralistic therapeutic deism” was introduced by the sociologist Christian Smith.

To the question whether the American freedom experiment was tied to Judeo-Christianity, because the overwhelming majority of Americans were Christians, or because the American experiment in freedom required Judeo-Christianity to sustain it, Neuhaus responded tentatively, but without hesitation. The American freedom experiment required Judeo-Christian anthropology for its sustenance. It provided a fundamental prerequisite for it, a metaphysical, pre-political division of powers between *sacrum* and *profanum*. This division was rooted in the distinctive ontology of a personal God, who had made a covenant with his people and with each person individually. *Yahweh* put such an individual under his which was absolute, because God could never be defined or touched, so his commands could never be destroyed or abolished. This covenant constituted the beginning of Western freedom, because it delegitimized once and for all any tyranny which might ever be attempted. It was this covenant, claimed Neuhaus, which gave rise to the chain of thought, tied to the practical, institutional experience of courageous people, which gave rise to the American republic, a universal achievement, and by implication the Christian gift to humanity.

*American Babylon* has a both polemical and devotional character, and it covers a vast amount of contemporary as well as eternal questions, culminating in a moving meditation on the nature of Christian hope. It weaves through theology as well as political philosophy issues, merging many currents. But its main theme is Augustinian in character, trying to explain the

[...] proper attitude that would-be inhabitants of the City of God should take toward the City of Man in which they find themselves in exile ... Are we in Babylon? Are we in exile? ... [Yes because] Babylon is a symbol for a place or idea.<sup>32</sup>

Neuhaus is aware that to identify America with Babylon is all too easy, since many in the world use the language of anti-Americanism to show the utter confusion and moral conceit of Americans, combined at the same time with their allegedly irresponsible use of power. But to say that America is Babylon, claims Neuhaus, is not to compare it with other societies, but to compare it with that

[...] radically new order sought by all who know love's grief in refusing to settle for a community of less than truth and justice uncompromised. [For Christians], it is [always] exile from that new order.<sup>33</sup>

This is not, as many in history accused Christians, especially Catholics, a dual belonging to and betrayal of the earthly homeland. Neuhaus explains that he belonged to America, accepting fully God's plan to know him through a mediation of American culture, a privilege which he cherished. Thus we accept our mundane existence within

---

<sup>32</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon*..., p. 48–49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

[...] the scandal of particularity that is [our] place in a world far short of the best of all possible worlds. This world, for all its well-earned satisfactions, is worthy of our love and allegiance. It is self-flattering conceit to think that we deserve a better world. What's wrong with this one begins with us. And yet we are dissatisfied. Our restless discontent takes the form not of complaint but of hope. There is a promise not yet fulfilled. One lives in discontented gratitude for the promise, which is to say one lives in hope.<sup>34</sup>

Neuhaus was aware that one has to find a way of being in a world that is not yet the world for which one hopes. For Christians this has always been an especially wrenching issue, since they are the people who are “in but not of the world” in a time which is “now” but “not yet”, the Old Testament, Jewish in origin, idea. Christians thus live “between the times”, engaging others in a language which is both rational and eschatological, building rational, mental bridges so a “final leap of faith” is not an absurdity, but a rational choice left after all alternatives have been exhausted. Thus,

[...] all time is time toward home, time toward our true home in the New Jerusalem. And so there is a continuing tension between the “this-worldly” and the “otherworldly” dimensions of Christian existence ... the word for this is prolepsis, an act in which a hoped-for future is already present. For Christians, the supreme act of prolepsis is the Eucharist Eschatology refers to the last things, the final things, the ultimate destination of the story of God's dealings with the world of creation. In the Christian view, that destination, that eschaton, has already appeared within history in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead ... The Christian claim is that God – the Absolute, Being Itself, the Source and End of all that is has invested himself in the human project. This happened with the Incarnation. The People of God is a pilgrim people ... But at the end of the day, we say with Paul, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known”.<sup>35</sup>

So Neuhaus's is a Christian narrative which is, of course, also a narrative within the entire Jewish narrative of the Old Testament, reaching to the Books of Genesis and Exodus, with the promise of Moses' Tablets. He is at the same time a Christian apologist in the best understanding of the word “apology”, a sense succinctly captured by the great Catholic apologist and writer Hilaire Belloc:

The Catholic Church is the exponent of *Reality*. In the twentieth century Catholics are the only organized body consistently appealing to reason. For if God is not, then all falsehoods, though each prove the rest false, are each true, and every evil is its own good, and there is confusion everywhere. But if God is, then the world can stand.<sup>36</sup>

Where is that *Reality*, and where is that opening to individual freedom? For Neuhaus this was an absolutely rational statement, since from it comes the Augustinian framework of *sacrum* and *profanum*. This is the shortest definition of the Western idea of freedom, claimed Neuhaus, when power was limited not by any

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13–15, 21–22.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from: *The Essential Belloc: A Prophet for Our Times*, ed. S. Bloch, Charlotte 2011.

human institutional framework, but by a metaphysical perspective which killed once and for all any despotic pretensions of the powers that be. This was the basis upon which any regime was from now on defined as legitimate or illegitimate. It was legitimate only when a state was providing the conditions for the development of a properly shaped conscience. This Augustinian framework is grounded in the idea of God as a person, which of course comes from Judaism. It is this Judeo-Christian narrative which has since antiquity become the freedom narrative of the West. Of course, writes Neuhaus,

[...] the earthly city of Augustine's time was the Roman Empire. The earthly city to which [I] attend is chiefly, but by no means only, America. Augustine's City of God provides a conceptual framework. For Augustine, the biblical narrative provides the drama of which we are part. City of God weaves into that narrative Augustine's penetrating insights into the possibilities and limits of the human condition [with] Augustinian sensibility. It is the sensibility of the pilgrim through time who resolutely resists the temptation to despair in the face of history's disappointments and tragedies, and just as resolutely declines the delusion of having arrived at history's end.<sup>37</sup>

It is within this Augustinian framework that Neuhaus deals with confused, always in tension, and interrelated problems of the modern American liberal-democratic experience. For Neuhaus the paramount issue is as always the dignity of human person as realized in freedom, of which the *sine qua non* element is a properly understood religious freedom. Here he is a warrior. But his confrontation with adversaries is always with an open heart. His form is dialogical, and his major enemies are not people who have different views, but monistic ideologues, totalitarians of one idea, who want to exclude others from the civilizational circle of moral conversation, as he liked to say, barbarians who look with disdain at "traditional values", refusing to be limited at all by what we know, good and evil, right and wrong. To wit by wisdom we have received, which is an instinctual point of orientation of the overwhelming number of the people.

*American Babylon* is in general a religious and cultural meditation and polemic, touching on issues ranging from the relationship of Christianity with postmodernity, the confused and tense relationship with monistic liberalism as a modern ideology of the secular state, through the question of a proper balance between political activity and eschatological expectation, to, finally, the relationship of Christianity to the American experiment. It also contains Neuhaus's special, personal, beloved subjects, written with hope mixed with delicate disappointments, interrupted by promising as well as false truces, of which the relationship of Christianity with the Jews, especially in America, occupies a paramount position. Neuhaus was a passionate man, but when it comes to Christian-Jewish relations his passion was at the same time tied to a romantic, in a theological sense, philosemitism, a stance which had, of course, many practical consequences as well.<sup>38</sup> Hoping cannot be

<sup>37</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon*..., p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> I owe the phrase "romantic philosemitism" to D. H. Hart, *Con Man*, "The New Criterion", September 2006, p. 127.

helped, observes Neuhaus, but the Christian reason for hope is intimately and inseparably connected with the people of Israel.

Neuhaus recognizes the dramatic dilemmas and challenges of Christian-Jewish inter-faith relations. They are often messy and acrimonious, fused with memories of bitter scars from the past, and sometimes an arrogance and bad will on both sides as well. He does not hide all the shades of such a dialogue. Yet he is adamant in stressing that such misunderstandings, complications, differences of languages used should and might be overcome with a mutual feeling of friendship and magnanimity. Both sides should be vitally interested in keeping up a metaphysical awareness which may come only from a properly understood freedom of religious experience.

This, argues Neuhaus, is the fundamental rock of human freedom, and at the same time it provides the surest basis of social and political security for all sides concerned. The main enemy of such freedom and security today is radical secularism. This radical secularism, rooted in an anthropology of the imperial Self, aims at the “naked public square” totally devoid of any transcendent dimension which is the only true guarantee of human dignity and the rights stemming from it. For Neuhaus, Jews and Christians should be aware of that danger. This monistic liberalism can push liberal democracy onto the slippery slope towards barbarism. If secular Jews do not recognize that such liberalism might be a danger to freedom as such, of which the authentic freedom of religion is a foundation stone, then they may fool themselves that such horrid experiences as happened before, including the Holocaust, can never be repeated.”<sup>39</sup>

Neuhaus refuses to subject the Christian-Jewish dialogue to the logic of liberal secular monism which would make the Christian-Jewish relationship a trite affair of looking at the Jewish-Christian drama not in a perspective of the eternal covenant offered to them by the God of Abraham, but through the lenses of recent calamities. If such a perspective is going to be obscured, Jews and Christians may easily slide into historical obsessions with past wrongs, mainly the ones which Christians committed towards Jews. In such a situation the true religion of the Jews and, by implication, the logic of Christian-Jewish dialogue, will be not the religion of the God of Abraham, but a “religion of the Holocaust”. This may constitute the highest form of idolatry, imposed on both sides by the liberal monistic narrative, and a posthumous victory of Hitler.

Friendship between a Jew and a Christian can be secured, thinks Neuhaus,

[...] in our shared love for God of Israel; the historical forms we call Judaism and Christianity will be transcended, but not superseded, by the fulfillment of eschatological promise. But along the way to that final fulfillment, there is no avoiding the fact that we are locked in argument. It is an argument by which – for both Jew and Christian – conscience is formed, witness honed, and friendship deepened. This is our destiny, and this is our duty, as members of the one people of God

---

<sup>39</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon...*, p. 168–169, 163, 165.

– a people of God for which there is no plural. The Church does not go [today] outside herself but more deeply within herself to engage Jews and Judaism. Christians believe that that redemption that is surely yet to come has already appeared in the Redeemer [Jews] sense of heightened expectation of something new – as distinct from the confirmation of a completely foregone and foreknown conclusion – seems to me the appropriate mode of eschatological hope for Christians. Knowing that we do not yet know even as we are known, we know that there is more to be known. Dialogue between Jews and Christians should be marked by an element of curiosity, by shared exploration of what we do not know, and perhaps cannot know until the End of Time.<sup>40</sup>

For Neuhaus, if a true, deep theological alliance might be formed, properly understood Christian-Jewish dialogue in the contemporary world is essential for a wise approach to politics and freedom as such. Both Jews and Christians are uniquely equipped to contribute to the human story of freedom by engaging in a secular world with their understanding of the human journey on earth. It is especially important for them to relativize the claims of historical and political self-sustained, and self-justified argument, stemming from a materialistic concept of reality. They should contribute to a decent society, countering the pretensions of the secular, monistic mind, which has a tendency to turn religions, and Christianity and Judaism as the religions of the transcendent God especially, into a castrated spirituality sustaining and enhancing, as in Rome, the glory of the naked state power. This is because Christians and Jews

[...] bear witness together. These are truths without which our life in exile is, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’. They are truths with which, in the vision of the prophet Jeremiah, the peace of our place of exile, in which we find our peace, can be approximately secured.<sup>41</sup>

If writing honestly about the relationships between Christians and Jews means writing about problems, the theological problems which Christianity faces in relations to modernity and postmodernity, the issue which occupied Neuhaus’s thought essentially one way or another throughout all his writings, they are summed up in *American Babylon*. Neuhaus wrestles with the fundamental problem of how Christianity has to face the hegemonic pretensions of the Enlightenment. This Enlightenment, with its truncated concept of rationality, is in an existential sense capable of explaining nothing about the ultimate predicament of human existence. But in a political sense, despite the pretensions of monistic liberalism, which requires all other alternative explanations of reality to be reduced to an inconsequential hobby of a private pursuit, it is also flawed. This is an old theological problem which in contemporary Christianity can be symbolically defined as a contest of two visions. One is the vision of Karl Rahner, with his concept of “anthropological breakthrough” which considered Christianity to be an inescapable part of modern consciousness. Hence the demand to understand the world from within it. The other

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 180–181.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182.



was the perspective of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, in the line of the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth, considered the Christian's role as a witness to the *anamnesis*. But this required defiance in face of the pretensions of the Enlightenment and modernity.

Neuhaus rejects siding with the postmodernist anti-rational rebellion, although he recognizes the dramatic problem which the Christians face. Subjected to the constant pressure of rationality alone, and its political equivalent of the monistic liberalism of rights, without any legitimate public recognition of the wisdom of tradition or revelation, they feel more and more like paratroopers dropped into an enemy's territory. The contemporary liberal culture, smug enough to think that liberalism can sustain the political and moral structure of rights without any recourse to tradition or revelation, seems to them not only arid, but outright dangerous. It is obvious that such liberalism lacks proper ontological and anthropological foundations. For this very reason it is not only a spent intellectual force, circling around within the extremely narrow confines of taken-for-granted existential axioms and in the process itself subverting the very basis of rationality of which it claims to be a master. But at the same time, refusing to recognize that, and not allowing other traditions to flourish in the public square, or pressing them to become just a folklore-type ornament, it is turning into a form of a monistic ideology with outright totalitarian pretensions.

However, Neuhaus rejects the postmodernist challenge as a tool of helping Christians to resist such totalitarian pretensions. He deals with this problem in an extensive discussion about Richard Rorty and the "age of irony" he symbolically represents. Neuhaus treats irony as a strategy to cope with the ubiquitous homelessness of the modern age, morphed into postmodern suspicion of everything. This suspicion, bordering on a happy celebration of senselessness and despair, is nevertheless a distinct form of response to that homelessness that is in fact inimical to Christianity. It is also a form of a modern faith, a default line of behavior in the face of disillusion and creeping despair, a road to nihilism and likely violence, not a meaningful response. Postmodernism is an attempt to see through all statements on reality as foundational statements and reduce them, including Christianity, to absurdity.<sup>42</sup>

The postmodern liberal project is thus the most radical form of pushing Christians beyond the public square, or all people who accept the classical concept of truth, by considering them not just in the wrong about reality, but as deluded, by the very fact of venturing into making any foundational statement. But another consequence is the total destruction of meaningful language. Culture cannot thus teach us anything, will is everything, and the greatest fear is a fear of not being novel, the only form of distinction left to the postmodern man in the sea of nonsense in his own life.<sup>43</sup> For Rorty everyone who is oriented in fundamental questions of

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 131.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149–150.

reality should be forced to privatize their project. By force, law, or ridicule, using the vocabulary of political correctness which today begins to assume the role of a tool not of communication but of repression, with such words as “tolerance”, “non-judgmentalism”, “diversity”, or “opinionated”. Rorthy also cannot bear the fact that his type of irony – being in fact a *mélange* of old vocabularies and traditions, unless we assume that his reason achieved an absolute point of neutral observation – may be just *nothing*, meaning *nothing* to the people whose innermost longing of reason or heart push them into the existing traditions, whose ontological status is, by Rorthy’s standards, exactly the same as the ironic self-destructive narratives of his will.

But it is nonsense to assume that such narratives do not come from old narratives, but claim to be transcending them, since by Rorthy’s atheistic standards they may only result from blind chemical reactions resulting in self-destruction.<sup>44</sup> From the point of view of orthodox Christians and, Neuhaus adds, observant Jews, the post-modernists do not even entertain the notion of the existence of such a vocabulary. For him everything “just happened”, including the appearance of the notion that everything just happened. But Christians and Jews, even if they cannot prove the compelling reasons by which they are persuaded to choose such justified beliefs, believe that in the end it will be proven that not everything just happened. That Christian eschatology, and as a consequence anthropology, does not terminate in the self.

Rorthy’s caricature of religion, including above all Christianity, means that he is unable to understand the phenomenon of religion, considering it simply as a dead, overcome “language”. For him the postmodernist project seems to be the third stage of the Enlightenment, succeeding rationalism and Romanticism, but this is an illusion. Together with Descartes and Hume, Rorthy has as his major enemy the “Great Trinity” of enemies: religion, tradition and authority, which are just inherited, thus necessary to be discarded entities and the language which depicts them. Neuhaus shows that such a tradition is a part of the great movement of the rationalist Enlightenment. It is part of the general attitude of “liberation”, which after 1968 left philosophers’ studies and hit the streets with a demand for a political dismantling of all “oppressive” institutions. But such projects end where all projects of self-salvation end, in “moral autcreation” and a narcissistic justification of base desire, when nothing matters, except nice living decided by the “self”, outside of any conversation about the common purposes of human beings.<sup>45</sup>

For Neuhaus this is just a stale repetition of absolute skepticism and nihilism, an utterly solipsistic guidance to life, since Rorthy concedes that he cannot prove that his narrative and its vocabulary are true, just best adjusted, pragmatic, so to speak. But with that, he has no reasoned criteria of any hierarchy of goods, what is better and what is worse, and his desire to continue his cherished liberal democracy is just hanging in the air.<sup>46</sup> Neuhaus makes Rorthy’s story one of the

---

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155–156.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 157.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 159–161.

central threats for liberal civilization in his *American Babylon* narrative. This is so because it constitutes one example of the much more serious intellectual and moral disarray in which Western culture found itself, which needs to be countered with “hope which gives reasons”. Not, adds Neuhaus, because people should accept them without any conditions, but because this is the only response to despair and the only chance to support the liberal democratic regime, which, lacking ubiquitous narratives like that, does not have any justification why anybody should defend it.<sup>47</sup>

Postmodernism is a dead end solution, and although Neuhaus was an enemy of the secular rationalism eliminating religion that is equally aggressive in its operation, he had no doubts that religious believers should never side with reconstructionists, even if ostensibly they battle the hegemonic pretensions of the Enlightenment. One cannot use Nietzsche or Rorty to battle Voltaire, warned Neuhaus, since the totalitarian pretensions of the secular reason cannot be battled by nihilists. They do not care. The new secular totalitarians can be battled only by people who believe that this world has sense and a meaning, that there is truth about reality and that truth is a source which can be rationally searched for, but only found with love.

### **Secular humanists, the idea of progress, and Christianity today**

This brings Neuhaus to the greatest feud today: between secularists, or secular humanists, or atheists, and religious people, or to put it better the people of the transcendent God. Secular humanists are typically those who acknowledge no reality that transcends the *saeculum*, meaning the temporal order. In this view, all that was and is to be confined within the limits of history. But do such humanists, can such humanists, live without hope? Some kind of eschatology, a vision of what might be and perhaps will be, a sense of destination in which history culminates in the true community for which we long, is inherent in the thought and action of all serious people. Thoughtful humanists know that this longing, this presupposition of purposeful action, has again and again ended up in utopian irrelevance, chaos and tyranny. They want no more of that. What are they to do with this hope that will not go away and cannot be discarded without risking the loss of their humanity, and how are they rationally to explain it? Many invest their hope in historical progress, and moral progress at that.<sup>48</sup> Few things are so constitutive of modern secularism as the idea that progress, which means essentially incessant change, is

[...] to something better ... it has an end ... what the Greek called a *telos*. ... Change is [thus] good because it is a movement toward the better on history's way toward some unspecified, and perhaps unspecifiable good. Such is an article of faith in the mindset we call modern.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 162.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 244.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

Christians do not believe in the uninterrupted triumphal march of history, “experience both ... personal and social is crucifixion; it is the way of the cross. At the same time, the cross is not the final word. There is resurrection”.<sup>50</sup> For the secularist, somehow on the road of that historical progress a compelling moral sense of right and wrong would emerge. But in fact, observed Neuhaus, what could only emerge is an interplay of utility mixed with power to hasten history. The Enlightened rationalism decoupled history and progress from the transcendental commands and rationality in search of moral sense, apart from metaphysics, so moral virtues can be created. Instead it began to slide into the nihilism of postmodernism, the rationalized irrationality which claims at the same time to possess an insight where history is going, and that this history is moral and accumulating moral progress. But this is sheer nonsense. There were attempts to produce ethics to which rational persons, acting rationally, must give assent, then they failed. The best known here was of course the Kantian attempt. If they produced, sometimes, and in some places, decent societies, it was because society was for a time able to live off the capital of earlier traditions of virtue. But now the capital has been depleted. The failure of the Enlightenment moral project has not come with a moral triumph, but moral nihilism and acedia, with a corresponding desperate default line, of grounding morality in an auto-creation of the autonomous, imperial Self defined as a basis of human dignity. That is why post-modernity is nothing new, but a version of modernity which failed, and the nihilistic avant-garde is a regression to the rule of barbarians. Neuhaus points out that barbarians today, as in classical Greece, are defined as those who are

[...] outside the civilizational circle of conversation about how we ought to order our life together, about the meaning of right and wrong, good and evil. They are those who know nothing and insist that nothing can be known about such matters. Yet they admit that we have no choice but to choose, to act upon our preference, in the full awareness that we can appeal to no authority beyond our willing it to be so.<sup>51</sup>

It may be the case that such barbarians will dominate within the liberal democracy, that they will define the monistic parameters of liberalism for a long time. Those who are called barbarians are not overt primitives; they resemble more the gentle, cultivated nihilists of ancient Rome, with diplomas from the most distinguished universities certifying that they are supposedly “the brightest and the best”. But this, Neuhaus points out, entirely misses the point. The new barbarians are

[...] not barbarians because of the hypersophistication with which they have removed themselves from ... the civilizational circle of moral conversation. In simplest terms, we may speak of “traditional values”. The barbarians refuse to be limited by what we know, by the wisdom we have received, and good and evil, right and wrong. For them the past is merely a prelude. The wisdom of

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

history is disenfranchised. Only the present gets a vote. ... What the powerful agree to call truth is what we will to be. In the beginning is not the Word but the Act. Truth is not discerned or discovered but is the product of our acting, knowing all the while that the action we call "choice" is only an illusion, for all our thinking, choosing, and acting is, in turn, the product of those little synapses in the brain following their predetermined course. And so it is that Nietzsche in his apparent triumph is finally defeated as the will to power is exposed in all its pitiful impotence one cannot be both. We cannot be, at the same time, both the captives and the masters of nature.<sup>52</sup>

What then, asks Neuhaus, for the claims of materialists and liberal monists that there is moral progress in history and that they know how to introduce it, if only they created conditions for each to exercise their autonomous will, liberated from the "oppressions" of religion, tradition, culture in general. Then they would base human moral progress on a preconceived will of a perfect moral order. There is, of course,

[...] no doubt that within a particular civilizational circle, there is moral progress, and regress [sic!] in how we live, but there is no progress in the sense of moving beyond the moral truths that constitute the circle itself we can develop not further implications of those truths, or we can step outside the circle by denying that there is such a thing as moral truth.<sup>53</sup>

Our times are hyper-sophisticated intellectually and with that we have painted ourselves into a moral Mexican corner, a modern Pontius Pilate rendition of the question "What is truth?" Neuhaus stands for permanent truths which he shows no hesitation in calling natural law, visible for instance in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. But such principles are also called first principles in ethics, and by definition are always first. For the moral analysis to go beyond or behind them would require an assumption that human consciousness can go beyond or behind itself. Of course such first principles draw support from all religious and moral traditions in inculcating certain rules, since these are the axioms that constitute the civilizational circle.

The most corrosive attack on such principles, as Neuhaus points out, is modern hermeneutics of suspicion, which comes from rudimentary Marxism, which claims that every rule, or law, or custom is perceived to have behind it some hidden purpose, power protecting its own interests. As a consequence, commands and limits are "explained away", to the cheering of many contemporaries, for whom this seeing through the first principles of ethics is exactly to see nothing, which means to see that there is nothing except what we will to do. So speak, points out Neuhaus, "the barbarians among us..."<sup>54</sup>

These modern barbarians, often in Armani suits, are fundamentally wrong, also because – Neuhaus follows here in the footsteps of Pope Benedict XVI in his 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi* [Saved in Hope] – to talk about progress in a materialistic

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80–81.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

sense, as if the historical march would secure us higher and higher plateaus of our once and for all “won freedoms” and “morals”, is a fundamental error. In the sphere of ethical awareness and first of all moral decision, there is no accumulation, since each man’s freedom is always unique. It is new and must be utilized anew. Such decisions can never be made in advance by others, since if they were, our freedom would be taken from us. Those who think that history aims at a particular point, and that they carry with them an awareness of a better moral future progressively attached, are prone, less or more consciously, to treat others who are not with them as simpletons, or corrupt. They should thus be nudged, by different means, towards progressive morality. But that would be an abolition of freedom.<sup>55</sup>

Neuhaus then looks at the recent and absolutely unexpected spate of books written by atheists, which have acquired enormous media prominence. One would assume that such a type of atheistic literature, with fury matching its sterile and shallow arguments, was gone with the “village atheists” of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One would also assume that in the West, with secularization theory taken for granted, such literature would be redundant for sophisticates. But Neuhaus realizes that this is a new situation, and it signifies “a last gasp of angry protest against a world that is becoming ever more overtly religious”,<sup>56</sup> since secularization has evidently not gone hand in hand with modernization, Europe being just an exception confirming the observation. Yet although secularization theory failed as a tool of explanation of the modernized world, it could be right in the sense that the old way of expressing religious convictions could be gone.

Religion in such a case would become more unorthodox, more individualistic, more “spiritual”, so to speak. But at the same time there is a growing enmity between the secularized elites and the religious masses, an old problem of Europe and a new phenomenon in America.<sup>57</sup> But a pitting of faith against reason and belief against knowledge was at the same time connected with another subtle distinction, between something which was legitimately public and something which was private, and thus definitely illegitimate in public. In this way of thinking, shows Neuhaus, there is

[...] a radical departure from the public nature of religion, whether that religion has to do with the ancient gods of the city or with the biblical Lord who rules the nations the gods of the city and the God of the Bible are emphatically public. The confinement of the question of God or of the gods to the private sphere constitutes what might be described as political atheism many today who are believers in private have been persuaded, or intimidated, into accepting political atheism. This powerfully contributes to ... the naked public square.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84–85.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.



One should add that this crop of new atheistic vitriol which has unexpectedly been visible of late might not be as irrational as Neuhaus thought. It constitutes the latest action on the part of the secularized elites, this time by proxy, to show their utter impatience towards people of belief. In other words, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century antireligious tracts engaged in a modicum of argument over ideas. Today's atheists simply show furious impatience towards not so much beliefs, as believers as people who refuse to see the light, resisting a future of progressive education. Contemporary atheism is as much an intellectual – or, one should say, quasi-intellectual – effort as it is first of all a political effort to eliminate believers totally from public life so they cease to conspire to subvert the march of progress. It is, in other words, an ideology in the service of naked power.

Neuhaus thinks that this might be, unfortunately, the future of Western intellectual culture. This culture will allow only the post-Enlightenment language of monistic liberalism, the dominant form of public discourse today. It has abandoned all pretenses to any search for a foundational justification of its claim to political and cultural monopoly, accepting an exclusivist anthropology of the imperial Self creating morality in a process of auto-creation. In a process of such monistic redefinition it tries to redefine its own human rights culture accordingly. The free market is an ideal here. The liberal, free market of everything, overseeing by means of a liberal state a homeostasis between Christians, Jews, Muslims, Marxists, Nietzscheans, utilitarians, devotees of Mother Gaia, and transsexuality, so they would not overstep the boundaries of a liberal certified discourse. This is a society in the image of a great university class, where under the teacher's supervision all points are freely discussed, and then all go for a beer. Such an intellectual discussion is another instance of modish fads which currently saturate the public square with such words as "diversity", "multiculturalism" or tolerance, or the right never "to be offended".<sup>59</sup>

Neuhaus asks the question, scandalous from the point of view of such monistic liberalism, "Can these atheists be good citizens?" This is a striking question for modern liberal sensibilities awash with a vocabulary studded with words such as "tolerance", "non-discrimination", or "non-judgmentalism". Neuhaus does not say that only religious people can be good citizens. After all he was one of the harshest critics, albeit rational, of corruption in the American Church in the wake of the pedophile scandal in 2001 and 2002. Neuhaus does not want to say that an atheist cannot be an exemplary moral person. Yet it all hangs on the definition of who is a citizen, and what are the ultimate bases of the liberal order. He realizes that the question whether atheists can be good citizens

[...] engages concerns that go beyond individual rectitude or moral and intellectual seriousness. As a generality, can people who do not acknowledge that they are accountable to a truth higher than the self, a truth that is not dependent upon the self, really be trusted?<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106.

As Neuhaus stresses, politics in its nature, if not always in its practice, was and is fundamentally a moral enterprise, whether we want it or not, by conscious intent or by default. In 1787 as today, questions of “oughtness” are moral questions, and the very vocabulary of politics is definitely moral, since we

[...] debate what is right and what is wrong, what is fair and what is unfair, what serves and what disserves the common good. In any society, moral judgments draw upon the deepest beliefs and convictions held by the people of that society. In America and most of the world, those beliefs and convictions are inseparable from religious traditions. This may seem self-evident to most readers, but in fact it touches on questions that continue to be hotly contested. It is true that the Constitution establishes a secular order of government. The word “secular” derives from the Latin *saeculum*, which means the present time. To say that this govern, and is secular is to say that it is for the present time; it is a temporal order. It is for the city of man, not the City of God. The American founders did not establish this constitutional order to be a church, although for some secularists it may be the closest thing they have to a church. This constitutional order is temporal, provisional, for the time being. It is not the New Jerusalem.<sup>61</sup>

The aggressive secular movement trying to capture and redefine American history is an object of Neuhaus’ concern. It persuades Americans that the history of their country was a secular, anti-religious enterprise. But America is an “incorrigibly and pervasively religious society”.<sup>62</sup> The social compact of 1787 was and is premised upon a sense of covenantal purpose guiding this *novus ordo seclorum*. Can an atheist, asks Neuhaus provocatively, be a citizen in such a nation? Of course he can be a citizen, and unreflexively a decent one, but he cannot be a good citizen. Such a citizen is dependent on others who sustain such a compact in which he can have a “free ride”. Neuhaus has a heroic, romantic image of Christianity and of American republican government. Christianity and citizenship are linked as two kinds of active stance towards public life, challenging its slide towards moral indifference and utter privatization. Moreover, this is an image of reality which needs to be defended by citizens in loyalty to their republic, not because it is theirs, stronger, or defending their interests better. This is the kind of a debased patriotism which Neuhaus abhors. America is a regime worth supporting, not because it is strong or belongs to Americans, but because it is moral, despite all its concrete foibles, stupidities and crimes committed in history, the idea so well captured in the Declaration of Independence. That is why an atheist citizen “cannot be a good citizen”, because he cannot give a compelling reason why he or she should sustain such a public order and towards what end, except as a simple framework sustained for security and consumption reasons, both rooted in egotistical individual wishes.<sup>63</sup>

Neuhaus is aware that there are atheists, and then there are atheists. There are many who are morally earnest, as were the protagonists of Albert Camus’s novels, whom he calls “saints without God”. But there are the “new atheists” who exult in

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 116.

assaulting religiously grounded foundations of the republican order. They glorify transgressive ways of thinking and behavior. From their indulgence and supposedly sophisticated, but in fact shallow superiority, which they equate with moral probity, they scandalize the religious people. But at the same time they preach their “warped” new religion of nothingness. This new breed of atheists fights not only with faith and arguments for it. New Atheists do not have such arguments, and the arguments they have are as primitive as they can be. In reality they fight religious people who allegedly offend their convictions that such people should not exist, since their truncated reason tells them that such a possibility is a rational impossibility. By religious people they mean of course mainly Christians and Christianity. But they are wrong, because those who

[...] adhere to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus turn out to be the best citizens. Those who were once called [in imperial Roman times] “atheists” are now the most persuasive defenders not of the gods but of the good reasons for this regime of ordered liberty. They are that not despite the fact that their loyalty to this polis is qualified by a higher loyalty, but because of it. ... The best of the good reasons they give in defending this regime is that it makes a sharply limited claim upon the loyalty of its citizens. The ultimate allegiance of the faithful is not to the regime or to its constituting texts, but to the City of God and the sacred texts that guide our path toward that destination. We are dual citizens in a regime that ... was designed for such duality. When the political order forgets itself and reestablishes the gods of the polis, even if it does so in the name of liberal democracy, these citizens have no choice but to run the risk of once again being called “atheists”.<sup>64</sup>

Neuhaus argues to those trying to destroy the morally given account why the American liberal regime is good and what its ultimate justifications are as destroying the very basis of the regime which protects them in the first place. The new regime they are trying to create is a monistic regime where they are to be the new secular “priests” and their will for power grounded. All grounded solely in an imperial, self-explaining and circular morality of the imperial Self, its moral autcreation. The new atheists cannot give any compelling account in defense of the regime of which they are part. This is so because in democracy society and government requires reasons. Community is communication; it depends on reasons that draw their authority from what transcends people, otherwise we are engaged in a life of sheer cheerful nihilism coupled with a debased utility. The new atheists represent a wrong, community-destroying way, which would also annihilate those who advocate such a society.

What, then, would be the conditions for a properly given moral account of why such a liberal regime as America should exist? What kind of civilizational circle of moral conversation is necessary, and what are the public conditions in which such a moral conversation could take place? Neuhaus realizes that the public square is a domain of politics and “politics is conflictual”. The true community is impossible in the *polis*, which is the “city of man”, since such a community is only the one in which human alienation will be finally fulfilled, which is tantamount

---

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117.

to this ideal state of living together in the truth.”<sup>65</sup> Such is the price of wisdom in the “city of man” which is not cynicism but wisdom, which was also contained in the “genius of the American constitutional order”. This constitutional order allows us to combine political mundane operations with loftier aspirations, with a clear understanding at the same time that “aspirations are tethered to interests”. But this realism recognizes that it is usually best secured by the contest of mundane interests typically claiming to be in the service of The Public Interest.<sup>66</sup>

It is here that Neuhaus defends the absolute necessity of religious presence in the public square. His idea, put forth in 1984 in *The Naked Public Square*, was not to be understood as a call for action. As he points out, it was sometimes understood as a call to engage in political activity in a direct way. For him

[...] the alternative to the naked public square – meaning public life stripped of religion and religiously grounded argument – is not the sacred public square, but the civil public square. The sacred public square is located in the New Jerusalem the best that can be done in Babylon is to maintain, usually with great difficulty. The best that can be done in Babylon is to maintain, usually with great difficulty, a civil public square. In the civil public square, all have a right to participate – not only because they are citizens so entitled by this constitutional order, but also, and more fundamentally, because we recognize that they are possessed of a human dignity that cannot be denied without threatening the ever fragile earthly city on which we all depend.<sup>67</sup>

Neuhaus presents several reasons here for why the public presence of religion is thus necessary for the maintenance of a free, democratic order.

This religious, Judeo-Christian voice is one of the most important public voices, because it is rational, and its verity is grounded in realism about human existence. Thus, aggressive secularism, which tries to eliminate Judeo-Christian biblical religion from the public square, constitutes a totalitarian attempt to monopolize the definition about human existence and then impose it by politics and law on the public square. This is definitely not a voice for a proper separation of a state and religion. Religious people have the right to participate in public life, because this is a fundamental life which stems both from their human dignity and from their citizenship, which implicitly has to recognize the equality of everyone in public life. The argument that citizens could enter the public square while separating their religious beliefs from their public activity, a standard secularist argument which has become a staple of monistic, totalitarian liberalism, is unfounded on two counts. One, it has to define religion as a kind of private hobby, or a kind of superstition which someone must abandon while entering the public square. This is the most primitive and ignorant understanding of what biblical religion is. Moreover, this is the most paternalistic, unequal and concession-type definition of citizenship created on a false premise, from which then the public life is constructed, with a distinction

---

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184–185.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 186.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

of a legitimate and an illegitimate activity. But an argument which stems from false axioms, which are themselves axioms of a secular “religion” grounded in this anti-religious prejudice, cannot constitute the basis for a civilized discussion. Religion is not a private thing, but a personal thing, and as such it is constitutive of personality as a whole, that is of human dignity. That is true, such a religious public presence must give reasoned argument while it engages in public activity, and Neuhaus is adamant that such an argument can be given, since the Judeo-Christian message is rational, it is realism *per se*.

Modern secular liberal monism is based on an old delusion of rationalism, and because of that bias it thinks that only it represents rationality. Religion, in fact Christianity, was defined as totally irrational. The secularists who think that only they represent rationality and by those criteria that religiously grounded argument, the argument of biblical religion, is nonsensical, have a primitive and truncated notion of limited rationality. Their argument is ideological, anti-democratic, anti-freedom and, in the worst and true sense of the word, elitist, or one should say Gnostic. Gnostic, that is conveying an idea that there is a self-defined and self-imposed elite which possesses the key to the meaning of reality. This elite allegedly has the right to tell others that they should follow their idea how the public argument can be framed, the polity construed, and how religious people should define their religion so they can be allowed into the public square. Of course not all religions are treated that way, but in fact, only Christianity. Not only prejudiced perception is at stake here. Neuhaus implies on many occasions that Christianity is treated in such a way because it is in fact the only competitor to the monistic pretensions of the modern state which may be a carrier of the new, exclusivist ideology of monistic liberalism, of which the anthropological basis is the imperial Self. This imperial Self as the key to secular, post-1968 anthropology and as the basis of the increasingly liberal human rights doctrine is obviously a competitor to Christian anthropology, and obviously arbitrarily declared as true. Such a liberal, monistic argument is ideological to the core, posing at the same time as rationality.

But rationality is inescapably connected with the real, that is the Being. Neuhaus is a realist. Monistic liberalism is against reality, proof of which might be the constant recourse to symbolic violence to keep its monopoly of power. For this very reason, in the civil public square, all have the right to participate, not only because what is at stake is essentially the question of dignity of human beings. It is because there they can be subjected to a test of a rigorous public argument. In this process a real dignity can be protected – not spurious dignity synonymous with the whims of the imperial Self, but human dignity which can only thrive in the true recognition of what a human being is and its human, potential nature. The discussion is not about a religiously grounded argument; it is about a fundamental anthropological and ontological argument as well, thus deciding the predicament of humanity.

Christianity constitutes here, claims Neuhaus, the most important way by which the reality of the human condition is rightly understood. For this reason,

a properly understood civil public square needs religious people on grounds of equality, but not because they are fully-fledged citizens, but by the fact of their controlling all of the reasons why they are citizens in such a liberal order in the first place.<sup>68</sup> This means that this earthly city of the liberal order is just a technical way of securing the ultimate human freedom and thus human dignity, the very essence, in turn, of the biblical God's gift to each person. Politics is in such a case inescapable, because it is a way of ensuring that warfare is carried on by other means, reflecting

[...] the intense conflict over differing visions of American culture, over the ideas and ideals that ought to shape our common life. For the sake of maintaining the civil public square, culture warriors on all sides ... are called to sharpen their arguments rather than their swords. This is especially the case with respect to the inescapable interaction of religion and politics ... Politics is primarily a function of culture, ... at the heart of culture is morality, and ... at the heart of morality are those commanding truths typically associated with religion. I [think] it is true in every society, but it is certainly true in this society, that politics and religion can be distinguished but never separated.<sup>69</sup>

If state interest is put above others, then such a state constitutes a return to a pre-Christian understanding of a state which has total sovereignty over its subjects, including religious beliefs, being dictated by Caesar. Such a danger is present today with an attempt to return to a monistic concept of sovereignty, and attempts of both the secular fanatics as well as religious fanatics to impose their order, thus to execute a confluence of a state with religion. This is "politics inspired by religious belief" in the worst possible sense.<sup>70</sup>

Politics thus engages and should engage all problems which come from human existence, with foibles, stupidities, errors politically expressed, but the deepest question with which contemporary politics has to deal, according to Neuhaus, is the issue of "what it means to be a human being". Although this is not an overtly political question, the dissolution of the common anthropological framework in the post-1968 world has made it so. If we rephrase this question, however, and

[...] put it in terms who is a bearer of rights that we, as a society, are obliged to respect, it is turned into a political question and must be addressed as such. And so we have center-staged in today's political arena what are commonly called the "life questions". They are typically posed in terms of conflict between individual freedom, on the one side, and the dignity of the human person, on the other. But the arguments invoking freedom and those invoking dignity can cut in surprising directions.<sup>71</sup>

For Neuhaus "life questions" are the fundamental questions engaged mainly by bioethics. It is here that problems connected with the present and proposed technical manipulations of the humanum, in other words of what it means to be human, impose themselves most dramatically in the public square.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.



The great dispute today – probably the greatest, claims Neuhaus – is over the idea of human dignity. Such a concept should be useful in discussing bioethical issues, but in fact it is being used today more to cloud clear thinking about the powers and responsibilities that shape the human future. If we ask the question whether the idea of human dignity is useful, there is an immediate question which follows:

[...] useful for what? In this context we are asking whether it is politically useful. This is the great question over which [modern liberal democracies] are locked in civil argument.<sup>73</sup>

Neuhaus realizes that Western civilization's reflection about ethics and morality is focused on the maxim "do good and avoid evil" or "do right and avoid wrong", from which stems the principle of practical moral reason in obedience to that maxim to direct one's will in accord with the human good. He realizes, then, that in such cases human good is served by respect for human dignity. But this is exactly the modern point of contention, visible if the argument is phrased in another way:

[...] if we speak not of human dignity but the dignity of the human person. The phrase human dignity may suggest the human collective and include efforts such as taking technological charge of the evolution of the human species. The dignity of the human person places the accent on the individual ... to be sure, the individual situated in society, and, one hopes, in society that aspires to being community ... Respect for dignity of others includes treating them as rational creatures capable of being persuaded by rational argument, even in the face of frequent evidence to the contrary. This is notably the case with respect to policy questions touching on the dignity of the most human persons.<sup>74</sup>

Neuhaus is convinced that the most salient contemporary issue where the dignity of the human person is at stake is abortion and the issues related to it. He terms abortion to be the most consequential political event of the past half-century. Here, in *American Babylon* the issue received especially moving treatment, as if constituting a fitting closing of a journey of a man who had begun his career as an activist at the side of Martin Luther King for the cause of the downtrodden. The fight against abortion turned into a fight of the same order as the fight for civil rights in America, and Neuhaus contributed enormously to making this fight all-important.

Neuhaus opposed abortion for moral as well as constitutional reasons. The moral case was straightforward to him. It touched the most fundamental political question of who the Americans were as a community. He defended the unborn on the basis of the dignity of the human person. A basic political question stemming from the moral one was: who belonged to the community, and whom did the American republic take under its protection? "Roe v. Wade" of 1973 was thus both a moral and a political act, since it radically redefined the political community by redefining its moral responsibility. It was also a profoundly anti-political decision,

---

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190, 197.

since the Supreme Court usurped to itself the definition of that community beyond a democratic mandate. In that, it also defined a new anthropology and a morality of the autonomous imperial Self, creating a new right. By doing that the Supreme Court in fact gave the power of defining what life is, and giving a decision what to do with this life, to an individual woman.

On constitutional grounds the 1973 “Roe v. Wade” decision was an exercise in “raw judicial power”, in clear contravention of the constitutional mandate. The real problem with these decisions was that they “removed a preeminently political, which is to say moral, question from public deliberation.”<sup>75</sup> The Supreme Court took an explosive moral and political issue from political discussion in the public square. Once abortion, practically on demand, became a constitutional right, all those who considered it unacceptable and wanted to keep it as an open moral issue were immediately defined as anti-constitutional, and delegitimized in the public square. The issue concerned not only the immediate abortion decision, but a total redefinition of liberal anthropology which put many people in dramatic situations, closing a democratic debate.

For Neuhaus, therefore, the moral question was an unavoidable fundamental political question. The Court removed questions about obligations of the community and definition of that community from its verdict in “Roe v. Wade”. But in fact it made an overt political decision in all such areas, turning the issue of abortion, settled for centuries of civilizational tradition which was part of American tradition too, into a battlefield. It did this by simply stating that the moral tradition which claimed that it was morally wrong to kill innocent people was not valid any more, and established a tradition that it was right to kill them.

The Court thus redefined morality, but it did this because it unequivocally redefined the anthropology on which the traditional morality rested. With that the Court put forth a new definition of who a human being as a subject of morality was to be. From now on it was to be a total sovereign of his or her own morality, outside of community, outside of tradition, outside of moral reasoning. The raw autonomous imperial Self was a source of all decisions concerning moral issues, including the fetus. This new anthropology was officially declared in the 1992 decision “Planned Parenthood v. Casey”. The Court thus redefined the entire culture, according to a new anthropology put forth by the most radical feminist lobby, adjusting the entire constitutional tradition to it and falsifying history. At the same time it nominated itself as an arbiter of life and death, by settings the criteria of distinction for good, since allegedly derived from the fundamental law of the Constitution.<sup>76</sup>

But his point goes deeper, namely that under the regime of “Roe” there are no clear and unambiguous rules which exclude such horrors from being contem-

---

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 198.

<sup>76</sup> The best exposition of the entire legal and moral revolution wrought by the Court, including falsifications of history, was done by F. J. Beckwick, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*, New York 2007.

plated. That is, if we accept the anthropology of the imperial Self as a basis of right, and as a basis of shaping other rights, there is no way the utilitarian logic of looking at society at large cannot creep in. This would happen not because of some conspiracy, but simply because there would be no cultural taboos which were thought inconceivable. The moral autonomy of the imperial Self can always be put forth for the entire rational argument why certain things may happen and why they should happen. But this constitutes a rational justification of a sheer desire for convenience. Apart from a subversion of the deeply entrenched concept of dignity of the human person, the Supreme Court also redefined the meaning of the foundational documents of the United States, especially the Declaration of Independence, with its unequivocal commitment to natural rights. The question was thus

[...] who belongs to the community for which we as a community accept responsibility, including the responsibility to protect, along with other natural rights, their right to life? This is a preeminently political question. It is not a question to be decided by bioethicists [or for that instance the Supreme Court judges]. Bioethicists [may] help inform political deliberations ... but these questions are – rightly and of necessity – to be decided.<sup>77</sup>

For Neuhaus it was obvious that “the people who are the American *polis*” were attached to the concept of the dignity of the human person. Yet, warned Neuhaus, what we might have experienced here was a subtle revolt of the elites against their own people, when the former tell the latter that their popular attachments are either prejudices, unreflexive biases, or false consciousness which need to be cleared off their heads, as having no legitimate place in an authentic, that is defined by them, *public* discourse.<sup>78</sup> This happened in the case of a huge portion of the public which has never accepted the “Roe v. Wade” verdict. It also just happened that such elites seemed to represent the contrary views and values to the majority of the American society, a view coming from the 1968 radical generation.

Neuhaus points to the dangerous potential of such a monistic liberalism, since the moral authority of those who would usurp for themselves a creation of rules of those who might be admitted and those who should be excluded from the public discourse is, at best very fuzzy, at worst totalitarian in nature. They are rightly perceived as such by a large section of the American people, who try to organize from bottom up to thwart such monistic attempts.<sup>79</sup>

Neuhaus is aware that in most cases which are related to ordering an ordinary life of a community, an invocation of moral reality beyond what is required for the resolution of a particular issue at hand is not necessary. But in the case of bioethics this is an entirely new game. Here people who are devoutly religious may advance in the public square arguments that are not distinctively religious in

---

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

<sup>78</sup> The concept of the revolt of the elites was introduced by C. Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, New York 1995.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 203–204.

character. They may for instance use natural law theory. Neuhaus defends here the theory of natural law, since

[...] contrary to whatever critics of natural law may say, the theory and its practice are not discredited by the observation that many, if not most, of the practitioners do in fact have definite ideas on sources and ends. Nor is the theory discredited by being widely perceived as a distinctively Catholic theory, which it is not. To the extent it is perceived that way ... its proponents can readily respond that a distinctively catholic contribution to our common life is to have preserved a universal understanding of reason that, being universal, is in no way peculiarly Catholic. It is an understanding that has strong roots in the Aristotelian view of politics and public discourse under discussion here.<sup>80</sup>

As for Americans, Neuhaus observes, religion and morality are inextricably intertwined. He understands at the same time that such universal arguments can appeal only to people who have a comprehensive, universal approach to human existence, to people who are morally serious, not just stating that what counts for them is a utilitarian approach or simple a hedonistic life devoid of burdens. Thus we have here a problem of how to invoke in public arguments an explicitly Christian or Jewish moral tradition derived from Scripture, so as to persuade others. One may say that religious people here have in the public square an obligation to present their arguments in a form that is public, which means that they should be accessible to all reasonable parties. This is an argument, for instance, found in such liberal-left authors as Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls, one which Neuhaus considers both unreasonable and unfair. Such a demand is not imposed on any other sector or institution of a society. All such institutions and groups, feminists, labor unions, environmental groups, gays and others are expected to advance their interests without giving any *a priori* justifications of their position.

They argue as if they were engaging in a discussion based on a universal language. In fact it is often a secular language based on a particular ideology masked as a rational thought. There is no reason why churches could not frame arguments supporting their interests the same way, simply on the understanding that they are another interest group and they have their rights to engage as such. But there is also another sort of discrimination. This is an argument that a distinctly theological language is worthless as a moral proposition. This means that, for instance, allegedly any language of any ethics liberal-left professor at any university, whether John Rawls, or Ronald Dworkin, or Martha Nussbaum, formulating his or her system based on, let's say, Kant's or any other self-contained system, is of higher legitimacy than the moral argument of Judeo-Christian ethics, which built the entire ethical, universal civilization in the first place.

But this is, as Neuhaus pointed out, a classical case of the tyranny of a minority, about which Tocqueville cautioned. This minority defined itself as the elite which decided to wage war on the majority of ordinary people in the false convic-

---

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205.

tion that because they are more educated and intelligent, then they are at the same time more moral and wise. It may be suspected that precisely the opposite might be true today. Such elites seem to usurp to themselves prerogatives of the once Gnostic elite, which nominated itself to be possessors of a secret truth, which would be revealed to the simpletons led by them. Thus today, warned Neuhaus, caution is needed in relation to

[...] the minority that would impose a rule that authentically public discourse be methodologically atheistic. [But in fact] restraint, civility, and disciplined reason are seriously undermined by the hostility to “comprehensive accounts” in our public discourse—especially if they are perceived to be religious in nature. In most intellectual enterprises, and not least in ethics there is a propensity to emulate the methodologies and exactitudes associated with the physical sciences ... [But] the concept of the dignity of the human person was arrived at, and is today sustained, by ... a different form of understanding. It is a form of understanding that is carefully reasoned, and frankly moral, and for most people who affirm it, it is in fact, if not by theoretical necessity, inseparable from a comprehensive account that is unapologetically acknowledged as religious. the hostility to admit this account to public discourse is long-standing ... It has long been argued by some that moral references should be eliminated altogether from law and public policy, that [modern liberal-democratic polity] is a strictly procedural polity devoted only to means and prescinding from ends ... But, of course, it was by ideas and experiences outside the law that the concept of the dignity of the human person was enshrined in the law.<sup>81</sup>

Neuhaus claims that the concept of the dignity of the human person depends on a universal understanding of a human person which is

[...] a person possessed of a dignity we are obliged to respect at every point of development, debilitation, or decline by virtue of being created in the image and likeness of God. Endowed with the spiritual principle of the soul, with reason and with free will, the destiny of the person who acts in accord with moral conscience in obedience to the truth is nothing less than eternal union with God. This is the dignity of the human person that is to be respected, defended and indeed revered.<sup>82</sup>

Neuhaus is aware that this is a very comprehensive concept of human dignity, but he thinks that it can be accepted by all, on the basis of the properly understood freedom principle. This freedom principle in the West has been clashing, at least since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with a monistic concept of the modern. This modern concept of sovereignty was conceptually a great return to pre-Christian times, when the unity of the state and society was complete and there was no external standard of judgment, let alone institutional limitation of state power. But the Christian idea of divided sovereignty, with *sacrum* and *profanum*, destroyed that unity, and introduced into Western culture the idea that a state is a dependent institution, subject to external judgment and in fact limited in its scope, also by the power of the universal Catholic Church.

---

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 208–209.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 210.

Modernity returned to the unified concept of sovereignty through the conversion of divine law to the laws on nature, or natural rights instead of natural law, and then this law of nature would become free of any association with divinity as such, it would be rejected for human self-legislation, which would become an exclusive province of a sovereign state, and subject to manipulation and exploitation for its own purposes.<sup>83</sup> With that, divine law, as a political concept and a function of this divine sovereignty, was pushed back by historicism into the remote, supposedly overcome, primitive past in an evolutionary scheme of progressive humanity. This self-declared emancipation from prejudice, with the latest stage of it in the post-1968 Western thought, became in such a case a logic of law and a logic of power of a modern state. It was first limited to the province of sheer politics, but soon it entered into all spheres of human life according to monistic liberalism's slogan that the "private is political".

The concept of freedom of the human person which Christianity introduced was a *sine qua non* condition of the human person in its social and political sphere, that without that there would be no Western freedom at all. This external judgment to assess the legitimacy of a state was of course a judgment of the properly formed conscience grounded in the moral universal law of God via natural law, for which an absolutely essential element was the creation of an individual person with an individual conscience. The concept of a person means a revolution in consciousness unparalleled in history, since from now on any political power was not dealing with an undifferentiated mass of anonymous groups, forever subjected to impersonal whims of state power. It was from now on dealing with persons, each endowed with a name and individual face and under the protection of a personal God. Each was created in God's image. This personal connection between each person and God took precedence and constituted a judgment on the actions of a state, which from now on lost any legitimate claim to the totality of a human person and his earthly life. Tyranny was annihilated in an instant, and although practical tyranny has often been a fact in history, it has never again been without a competitor, moral, intellectual and eventually institutional.

The gradual desacralization of the public space, as a result of the catastrophic religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the intellectual developments which placed the blame on religion – that is Christianity per se – and not on the political use of it, resulted in a return of the monistic concept of sovereignty. The rest, as they say, was history. Rights were substituted for natural law, the state for plurality of Christendom. But if the experiment did not thoroughly fail, at least it has several times produced calamities of modern ideological killings which were possible, since the very idea of inalienable personhood was simply brushed aside.<sup>84</sup> The process went hand in hand with a gradual atheization of culture with the substitution of liberal rights for Christianity's grounded rights. Finally, this atheization of the state and its

<sup>83</sup> See: L. Strauss, *Natural Law in History*, Chicago 1955.

<sup>84</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon...*, p. 210–211.



growing power was to be kept in check by the modern human rights doctrine, with human dignity rooted in all kinds of Kantian or neo-Kantian justifications, gradually more and more dubious as an effective justification imposing a universal willingness to accept them. The crisis of the modern concept of human rights in relation to the monistic pretenses of modern liberalism based on the reigning anthropology of the imperial Self is more than evident.<sup>85</sup>

### **Liberal atheisation and the covenant story of the American Founding**

Neuhaus believes, after Murray, that America is different, in fact exceptional. Exceptional not only in a political sense but in a moral sense as well, since it has not yet abandoned this connection with the external justifications of personhood and rights, and has not made methodological atheism a *sine qua non* condition of the public discussion of right.<sup>86</sup> The concept of human dignity in America has not been thoroughly subjected to gradual methodological atheization, meaning that secularization has not been able to reassert a sovereignty of the state with its own definition of what human dignity and what the human person was, as was attempted, for instance, by the “Roe v. Wade” (1973) and “Planned Parenthood v. Casey” (1992) decisions of the Supreme Court.

Neuhaus thinks that America is in this regard a unique society, still faithful to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and because of this promise inherent in its covenantal message, it is still truly an “almost chosen nation”. He does not reject the conventional, contractual theory of government, but is more attached to a covenantal theory of the American founding.<sup>87</sup> He is not necessarily original here – the covenantal story of America was for a long time a staple of American civil religion intertwined with the Protestant cultural paradigm – but at the same time he thinks that this story has been forgotten, and that perilous consequences of that might follow.

If America is a covenantal nation, “under God” – and this is so, as Neuhaus says with a straight face to secular accusers, who claim that he is a chauvinistic particularist, not universalist – this is because

[...] among the political orders of the earthly city America is “the last, best, hope of mankind”. Although it was added late to the Pledge of Allegiance, the affirmation that we are a nation “under God” is not unimportant. It does not mean that [Americans] are God’s chosen nation and [they] should be uneasy even with Lincoln’s sharply modified claim that [they] are an “almost chosen” people. Nor does it mean that [they] are immune to the temptations and tragedies of all earthly orders. To say that [they] are a nation under God is to say, first and most importantly, that [they] are a nation under transcendent judgment. Judgment and promise are inseparable.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>85</sup> See: M. J. Perry, *Toward a Theory of Human Rights: Religion, Law, Courts*, Cambridge 2007.

<sup>86</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon*..., p. 211–212.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27–30.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24–25.

No doubt, the modern world can be described as a slow dissolution of the covenantal story of humanity from which the Western idea of freedom originated. This idea of freedom stemmed from a destruction of united sovereignty. But modernity embarked on its slow reassertion again. This reassertion of the unified sovereignty thus goes hand in hand with the dissolution of Judeo-Christian anthropology and the Christian theory of power. It is based on the axiom of the impossibility of a unified political, earthly sovereignty, by the very fact of the absolute sovereignty of God being in personal covenantal relationship with all human beings. Humans are under the individual protection of God, with human arrangements always conditional, to be recognized as legitimate, only if they do not subvert that prior relationship which was a source of personal freedom and its duty to shape consciences according to God's promise, so the fullness of human potential can be achieved<sup>89</sup>.

Modernity has progressively tried to destroy that dualism, by a subversion of the political theory on which it rested, but first of all by a destruction of a metaphysical story, the transcendental "story" without which such a dualism was impossible. It attached a metaphysical dimension to this world in the form of the idea of progress, with a destruction of transcendental religion as a competitor to the pretenses of the modern state. In that process a corresponding reduction of the metaphysics of God to the metaphysics of historical progress occurred, coupled with the psychotherapeutic progress of self-realization.<sup>90</sup>

There is, of course, a danger of idolatry. G.K. Chesterton remarked in the 1920s that "America is a nation with the soul of a church", showing a certain ideologisation of the American message, but that in itself was not yet a danger. The real danger, pointed out Neuhaus, is that "in the absence of an ecclesiology that tethered them to the Church from its beginnings through every period of its history, for many American Protestant thinkers America became their Church."

Neuhaus adamantly opposed the idolatry of treating America as a fulfillment of the New Jerusalem. Mainline Protestant Churches have been prone to Gnosticism since their transformation of particularities and bringing "religious knowledge "to the world has been connected first with Americanization of such a religious knowledge of social gospel, then with its universalization through American power."<sup>91</sup> Whatever form such idolatry took, it is profoundly against the real understanding of America as a universal, covenantal and religious nation.<sup>92</sup>

There was yet another attempt at solidity and the doctrine of this "new Church" of civil religion, with the rise of the Social Gospel movement and Americanized Christianity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then America became "not only a nation with the soul of a church, but [became] the Church", its self-understanding

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 34.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>91</sup> R. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation*, Wilmington DE 2003.

<sup>92</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon...*, p. 39.

soon shattered by the fundamentalist-modernist split within Protestant Christianity. There was then a substitution for this spiritual longing of self-redemption as psychology and psychotherapy movement or John Dewey's educational and monistic American education, kind of a

[...] distinctly American religion that would leave behind the doctrinal and ecclesiological disputes of the hoary past and embrace the people of good will in the grand cause of progressive social reform.<sup>93</sup>

This idea stuck with the American progressive intelligentsia and found the "new church" in democracy as such.<sup>94</sup> To a certain extent the rebellion of the '60s was a kind of search for a true "church" of America as contrasted with the corrupted "'Amerika' [sic!], against which it protested". Whatever the goal of such a mesmerizing search, all such efforts were conflating covenantal mentality with the totality of American experience, transformed from now on for good. Yet such efforts constituted a kind of idolatrous escape from the burden of the „religious covenant“, understood within the structured, Augustinian framework. All of them could be looked upon as "the perennial effort ... to make sense of the story of America within the story of the world".<sup>95</sup>

We must therefore return, argues Neuhaus, to a thorough rethinking of the proper relationship of America's story with that of the world, in whose "comprehensible account" it is caught up. There is no other way, since from the very beginning, from John Winthrop, through the Puritans, to today this connection has been solid and inescapable. A good starting point for Neuhaus is Murray, who is "an unavoidable point of reference in discussions about America and providential purpose". Neuhaus realizes that Murray was devoid of any idolatry towards America and, unlike Dewey or Rorty and many others, who were yearning for secular "metaphysics", America was not his religion, because he never confused America with the Church.<sup>96</sup> The American founders agreed with the long-standing Christian stance that God had planted in the heart of man the precepts of natural law, sealed for them in the Decalogue. Neuhaus's vision was congruent with this vision for universal reasons, justified by the ultimate human value of freedom in pursuit of one's betterment. This public discourse should be guided by an appeal to natural law, the central idea of the American founding written into the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and at the same time accompanied by the presence of a Church that effectively

---

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>94</sup> The latest progressive hero of that movement was the late Richard Rorty, who abandoned his post-modernist "church" and recognized American democracy as a real, valuable thing. R. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, Cambridge Mass. 1992, p. 87.

<sup>95</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon...*, p. 45.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

[...] challenged democracy's idolatrous aspirations to finality – could provide a public philosophy for sustaining the American experiment in producing as just and free a society as is possible in this our exile from our true homeland.<sup>97</sup>

There have been many who have proposed a remedy to the recovery of this universal message of the American experiment, which means a recovery of natural law, so central to the Declaration of Independence. Traditionally, Churches in America, mainly the mainline Protestant Churches, have performed that task of being a primary bearer of the American story as a universal story for humanity. Apart from that, the tradition of natural law was not part of their theology. But this is no longer the case, as Neuhaus pointed out. The mainline Protestant Churches are today viewed as “oldline” or “sideline”, and unfortunately they have totally mixed politics with the religious message, and in that very partisan politics, planting “the banner ‘Thus Saith the Lord’ on the cultural and political platform of the Left”. In turn the evangelical Protestant insurgency, having greater political visibility and vitality, have planted “the same banner on the cultural and political platform of the right”.<sup>98</sup> This is a tragedy, according to Neuhaus, since both undermine

[...] a religiously informed public philosophy for the American experiment, contributing at the same time to the political corruption of Christian faith and the religious corruption of authentic politics; both have forgotten that, as it is said in the Letter to the Hebrews, we have here no abiding city.<sup>99</sup>

But the Catholic hierarchy is also split, partly still trying to ingratiate itself into the old mainline Protestant establishment, remembering the historical difficulties of being accepted into American life on equal terms, and partly sharing its belligerency with the evangelicals on moral and cultural questions. But, warns Neuhaus, Catholics should remember that the Church is to be the “contrast society”, not to be above the quarrel, but neither the captive to it. As Neuhaus stresses over and over again, the Church's chief political contribution is to provide a transcendent horizon for American civil arguments, the role it should be fulfilling all over the world at the same time. America has a great “proposition”, which provides Americans with a great chance to conduct such a discussion in terms that are universal and particular at the same time. But there is no way that cultural limitations of one's position can be avoided, or for that matter, shunned. Culture is the only medium available for us, claims Neuhaus, and a particular national community should not be treated as a calamity, but as a chance to improve on it, in the light of truths higher than the immediate chances of realizing that.

There is thus no chance and no need to shun American identity, especially if that identity embodies such truths in a direct way. There is a great role of America, which can help make such truths understood by all. This should be done not by im-

---

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52–53.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*.

position, but, as John Winthrop and Abraham Lincoln envisioned them, by making oneself a better community. So, concludes Neuhaus,

[...] when I meet God, I expect to meet him as an American. Not most importantly as an American but as someone who tried to take seriously, and tried to encourage others to take seriously, the story of America within the story of the world. The argument, in short, is that God is not indifferent towards American experiment, and therefore we who are called to think about God and his ways through time dare not be indifferent to the American experiment. America is not uniquely Babylon, but it is our time and place in Babylon. We seek its peace, in which, as Jeremiah said, we find our peace, as we yearn for and anticipate by faith and sacramental grace the New Jerusalem that is our pilgrim goal. It is time to think again—to think deeply and think religiously—about the story of America within the story of the world. Again the words of Augustine: 'It is beyond anything incredible that God should have willed the kingdom of men, their dominations and their servitudes, to be outside the range of the laws of his providence.'<sup>100</sup>

Neuhaus was hope personified, Christian optimism applied to all the most forlorn causes. It was for this reason that he never refused to engage in a civilized conversation with anyone, even the cognoscenti in the West who had already stopped responding to the Christian narrative. But Neuhaus was constantly challenging that predicament, and wanted to engage reality and others in a conversation about Being. For him, as a Christian and a Catholic it was obvious that the Covenant and the Promise have never been revoked, and humans are all Pilgrims yearning for return to innocence, which once was, and they hope might be again. Humans may commit errors, even very grave ones. But he refused to accept that fate, since he always repeated, after Ralph Inge and T.S. Eliot, that quintessentially bittersweet blessing of Christian hope, that in this world, "there are no permanently lost causes, because there are no gained causes".<sup>101</sup>

It is not victory which counts, but the verity of the cause which has to be recalled all over again. Christians have a good word for that: "witnessing". And Neuhaus was one of the greatest Christian witnesses, and apologists, in a contemporary, increasingly ideological and monistic liberal Agora.<sup>102</sup> We have a will to decide what to take and what to abandon. This is not Nietzsche's choice based on the will for power and grandeur. This is not existentialism's choice which claims that we are simply creatures of time. Christian time is different, because it rejects a senseless concept of time, such a concept of time which

[...] explain[s] our existence exhaustively and without remainder. Time too is a creature. There is 'reality' beyond time because being creatures of time, we are unable to think except in a temporal model. It is an irrational presumption, however, to presume that reality is limited to what we conceive.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

<sup>101</sup> W. R. Inge, *More Lay Thoughts of a Dean*, New York 1931, p. 201; T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*, Garden City 1929, p. 78.

<sup>102</sup> R. J. Neuhaus, *American Babylon...*, p. 213–214.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223.

Neuhaus considers such a rationality to be an instance of a truncated reason, which is against Christian reason which he thinks is incomparably wider, not subject to self-contradictions, circular self-justifications or self-explanations. Existentially such reason is dangerous since it can produce either despair or presumption, the two most diametrically opposed forms of hopelessness. At the nadir of despair, argues Neuhaus, quoting Joseph Pieper, if we reject eschatological fulfillment, which is in itself the self-destructive and perverse, then we behave in a way which "borders on the most extreme form of the not less destructive delusion of presumption, meaning a logical affirmation of non-fulfillment, as though it were fulfillment".<sup>104</sup>

Neuhaus shows that Christianity broke the senselessness of experience of time. Judaism's doing that was based on promise, but Christianity's God incarnated himself in the finitude of space and time, effectively ending hope without palpable proof that it would be fulfilled. That is why the Christian pilgrim's destination is "not so much a place as a person". This Christian hope is not otherworldly, in the sense of a promise that people will go to heaven when they die. This is not so much untrue as it is incomplete and woefully inadequate, since "redemption or salvation is ... not an escape from this world but as participation in the future that is already happening in..."<sup>105</sup> The modern displacement of the gospel of Christ with the gospel of historical process gave way to a new faith in progress. It was a great substitution in which faith has become something like a new religion, with the enlightenment envisioning infinite progress. This enlightenment was to free a man at the same time from tyranny of the Church, metaphysics and the oppressive political systems. Hope without which people could not live, found expression in the idea of progress, which depended upon freedom, innovation, imagination and self-realization in history.<sup>106</sup>

But this causes freedom being tied to change, as Neuhaus observes, and in the absence of the stable human nature, change presses for the infinite malleability of human nature in the name of progress. The modern idea of "emancipation" from "oppression" to freedom of the imperial Self, total moral freedom, is a consequence of such a logic. No structure can guarantee a good state of the world, since people, individual people at least, cannot reconcile themselves to any definite structure like that. It is not only that man's freedom would be denied. This is above all because there is never a point in which a human being along the way of progress would consider his or her imperial Self finally liberated and reconciled with reality. Psychotherapy is one answer to that, but it obviously failed.<sup>107</sup>

The substitution of historical progress for a Christian vision of eschatological progress turned out to be an escape from Reality as such, which Christianity defined by locating anthropological reasoning in a proper metaphysical perspec-

---

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223–224.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 232.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 235.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 236.



tive. Such an escape from Reality has not brought freedom, observes Neuhaus, but periodic enslavements and ultimately despair. Neuhaus's appeal to recognize the Christian eschatological perspective is a call for return to Reality, and thus to a properly understood reason, which could then engage itself so as to decipher the bordering condition of human nature, that is freedom itself. It is thus a plea not for a generic religion, which too often today is tantamount to nebulous, psychotherapeutic spirituality, but for the Christian idea of freedom, its only sure basis and human dignity in that.

The practical consequences of such an approach were manifold, but one was obvious, as Neuhaus had apparently no doubt in stressing. Liberal democracy, if it wanted to sustain its idea of practical freedom, had to recognize the political significance of the Christian theological language of freedom as a corrective of that freedom which was tied to the idea of progress. The latter leads inexorably either to totalitarian control in the hands of the "masters" of direction of that progress or to a debilitating anarchy and chaos of the imperial Self, declared to be a new god of the post-modern, solipsistic and eventually narcissistic human being. If so, the "naked public square" is inimical to the self-declared aims which the liberal state wants to achieve. It does not sustain freedom but subverts it, and as a consequence destroys human dignity. And it subverts human dignity because it subverts reality as it is. Both Christian eschatology and the idea of progress were a response to the loss of human innocence. This loss of innocence has, Neuhaus always claims, pushed humanity into all kinds of more or less desperate attempts, sometimes stupid, sometimes criminal, or just ridiculous, to "close the gap" and to liquidate alienation, so to "close time".

The most scandalous reality of that alienation was of course the fact of human mortality.<sup>108</sup> The secular pilgrims' destination is just history, propelled by progress in a frantic activity to extend existence, and more and more infusing a secular myth with all kinds of spiritual sprinklings which do not solve the fear, just sublimate it into a kind of melancholic pantheism, which gives no answer, just an anesthetic. Neuhaus shares an essentially Augustinian view of the limits and chances of history, of a dialectic of time and eternity, of a fight between the city of man and the City of God which will never end here on earth. This is a perspective which is decisive in his vision of what Christianity and the Church has to propose to the world. Atheism might be a form of a cry for justice. Neuhaus does not deny that, noticing only that the new atheists usually act as "secularists" or "secular humanists". Although Christians rightly lay claim to the title of humanism, secular humanists, as the phrase is used today, are typically those who

[...] acknowledge no reality that transcends the saeculum, meaning the temporal order. ... All that was and is to be is confined within the limits of history. But such humanists ... can [not] live without hope ... Some kind of eschatology, ... a sense of destination in which history culminates in the

---

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238–239, 230.

true community..., is inherent in the thought and action of all serious people. Thoughtful secularists know that this longing ....has again and again ended up in utopian irrelevance, chaos or tyranny. They want no more of that. What then are they to do with that hope that will not go away and cannot be discarded without risking the loss of their humanity, and how are they rationally to explain it? Many invest their hope in historical progress. ... many in "the satisfied conscience" .... [after] Kant. [But] it is something of a stretch, however, for the person of "satisfied conscience" to believe that his life answers the question of cosmic meaning. Such a view may reflect a modest opinion of history but an implausibly inflated opinion of the self. It implies the impossible disengagement of the self from history, by which the self is constituted, and however well intended, is not easily distinguished from egotism unbounded.<sup>109</sup>

But there is no vindication of the self, claims Neuhaus, in isolation from the world of which humans are part. It is exactly the redemption of the world, which is totally contrary to disengagement from it, in which Christians seek their own redemption.<sup>110</sup> In that perspective, asserts Neuhaus, Christians, and other people of transcendental faith, engage the atheists of this world, their fellow exiles in the city of man, even those, like post-modernists, who would distance themselves from the world by substituting irony for hope's longings and mundane grief. Christians have always been with dual citizenship. They know that this it is impossible to save this world by itself, and cannot provide a perspective harnessing the calamities of a progressive mind. Neuhaus's book suddenly becomes the end a great American jeremiad, as if recalling the religious and political sermons of John Winthrop, Orestes Brownson, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King. The Jeremiad has been a Christian and all too American genre, a warning against losing hope and a call for action without which there is only quietist resignation in a meaningless world, a betrayal of that great promise which God gave Americans in their providential scheme. American biblical culture has as its central element oratory, an indispensable feature of the public life of the United States.

The American promise imposes on it a heroic challenge to live up to it. They sealed that promise in their founding document, the Declaration of Independence, as a political as well as religious document, infused with transcendental as well as mundane references. So in the great tradition of the Jeremiad Neuhaus plunges into a fiery, oratory envisioning a time of a great, as usual, contest between hope and despair, between heroism and acedia, when Christians and Americans seek to be

[...] faithful in a time not of our choosing but of our testing. We resist the hubris of presuming that it is the definite time and place of historical promise or tragedy, but it is our time and place. It is a time of many times: a time for dancing, even to the songs of Zion in a foreign land; a time for walking together, unintimidated when we seem to be a small and beleaguered band; a time for rejoicing in momentary triumphs, and for defiance in momentary defeats; a time for persistence in reasoned argument, never tiring in proposing to the world a more excellent way; a time for generosity towards those who would make us their enemy; and finally, a time for happy surrender to brother death – but not before, through our laughter and tears, we see and hail from afar the New Jerusalem and know that it is all time toward home.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 245–246.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 249.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 250–251.

Neuhaus, with his *American Babylon* saying farewell to his earthly existence, accepted the idea that Christendom might be, for a moment, gone. But the battle which Christianity has been is a universal battle for the type of civilization in which we all would like to live. It was inconceivable for him that such a civilization might let go without a fight of people of good will against the sinister winds of the new one. This new civilization professed to be a charitable, human rights civilization, but suddenly began to decide who was to live and who was to die, and recognized a human person as the ultimate judge of good and evil rooted in the imperial Self as a basis of right. It was inexorably pushing morality into the abyss of egotistical desire. Neuhaus believed that this final act of rebellion of a Creature against the Creator was just a temporary tribulation which has to be endured.

Neuhaus's life was a lifelong love affair with Christianity, the universe of his choice and love from which he explored everything else. Christianity was for him a home, a duty, a call to action, a final rest. He did not believe in just any god, let alone the god of the new atheists. He believed in God, who made a covenant individually with every human being, so each could be not only historically, but metaphysically safe, so we could finally rest and the dragons of our cosmic fear and insignificance be broken. Neuhaus's life was an incessant fight for life against the forces of death. Everything he did in his life was propelled by a desire to preserve this spark of God's mad love for human beings so they could transcend their beastly state of nature and be better than they themselves are. His fight with the "naked public square" was not a trite affair. It was ultimately a war for *caritas* against the modern sophisticates in love with themselves, thinking that this limited point in time and space give them the authority to usurp for themselves the definition of human reality. The barbarians who embarked on the totalitarian project of "emancipation", which is in fact an emancipation to an unbound anarchic freedom of the imperial Self, the ultimate liberation to Nothingness, another great project of human engineering to create a new civilization, ending history for good. This was for Neuhaus a project out of the story of the great rebellion in Paradise, which would end up at the cemetery of heuristic ideas as well.

As for *Mater Ecclesia*, his most intimate home, knowing well that this is the sacred institution of the fallen people, he had no patience with reformers who had not recognized the great continuity amid evolution, which always comes back to the Source. If asked what kind of Church he was for, the Church of yesterday or the Church of tomorrow, he could respond as his friend, the great Avery Cardinal Dulles, once calmly responded to such a question: "The Church of yesterday, the Church of today, the Church of tomorrow, the Church eternal".

Neuhaus knew that Christianity could be defeated, but human longing for eternal love can never be defeated or sublimated. As a public philosopher he was in a classical sense a lover of truth. Neuhaus knew the fallacy of thinking that we are the last, and that because of that, we can see through Being as better or much wiser than those who were our predecessors. Thus for him history, let alone politics, was

not all there was to life, and could never quench our thirst for fulfillment. The ultimate meaning was somewhere else because, although existentially

[...] the time of tribulation is upon us, and we now must make our way through its darkness, guided only by the waning lights of memory and the flickering flame of hope, not knowing when the night will end, [we are] sustained by the sacred assurance that whoever perseveres to the end shall be saved.<sup>112</sup>

He was an outstanding public teacher in the best tradition of Christian apologetics. He was an outstanding teacher because, to paraphrase the Catholic political philosopher James V. Schall, he led all not to himself, but to the truth, to something not just passing and ephemeral, but to that which just eternally *is*.

---

<sup>112</sup> D. B. Hart, *A Perfect Game*, "First Things", August–September 2010, p. 55.